

Designing to improve social platform experiences for and with queer young men

by Tommaso Armstrong

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

under the supervision of Professor Elise van den Hoven and Professor Simon Buckingham Shum

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Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology

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Certificate of Original Authorship

I, Tommaso Armstrong, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Computer Science, Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Preface

In 2011, I moved back to my hometown of Christchurch, New Zealand. Exactly a month later, a major earthquake hit. Although my family was very lucky to survive without harm, the central city where I lived was cordoned off and there was no way to get home. We moved to another town and for the first three months, the only possessions I had from my previous life were my school uniform, my mobile phone and my iPod Touch.

Around that time I started to figure out that I was queer. Far away from my friends and the support networks that I had once relied on, social platforms helped connect me to other queer young people and explore who I was. Since those early days, they have remained an important part of my life and have continued to help me explore what it means to be queer, find community, and express myself.

When choosing a topic for my thesis, I wanted to work on something at the intersection of technology design, human connection, and social impact. Remembering the enormous impact that connection to others through social platforms had on me as a lonely queer kid trying to find his place in the world, I decided to explore how their design could be improved to further support the LGBTQ+ community.

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Abstract

Queer young men depend heavily on social platforms. However, their needs are often not adequately considered in the design of general platforms and they can be exposed to intra-community harms on platforms such as dating apps. Recent work within HCI has exposed some of these issues, although there are limitations with existing work understanding current experiences and there is a lack of work that involves design approaches. To address these gaps and extend current understandings, this research took a multi-study approach. First, an exploratory study used semi-structured interviews with 9 participants to ground the work. Second, an in-depth study with 24 participants used semi-structured interviews and probes to better understand experiences. Finally, a co-design study was used to translate findings into design concepts. This started by running co-design workshops with 13 technology designers before the resulting concepts were evaluated in sessions with 15 queer young men. The findings from this work extend current understandings of how queer young men use social platforms by: confirming the importance of social platforms for queer young men, showing that curation practices extend beyond concealment of identity, calling attention to intra-community harms as a significant issue, highlighting the role that dating apps played in finding community and peers, and bringing light to ways that social platforms are used in not safe for work ways not currently described in HCI literature. This work also provides a number of design recommendations in the following areas: giving people have more agency over their experiences, helping people navigate mismatched expectations on dating apps, and helping people connect to community. This thesis makes four main contributions. Empirical contributions relate to extending understandings of, the experiences of queer young men on social platforms, and how to design social platforms to be supportive of their experiences. Two further artefact contributions are made, a probe kit that can be used in future work, and a design resource for social platform designers that makes our design recommendation accessible outside of academia. The thesis ends by proposing a number of directions for future work to design platforms in ways that are: more dynamic, reduce the negative impacts of idealised presentations and support trust on dating apps; and to conduct further research into the ways that social platforms are used: to curate presentation beyond concealment, in ways that include dating apps and NSFW uses; and to explore the transferability of our findings to other groups.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we ¹ set the stage for this thesis. We start by describing the research context, providing a high-level overview of how social platforms shape the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people, and then providing definitions for terms we use in this thesis. Following this, we describe the research problem we have identified, and the aims and scope of this thesis. Subsequent to this, we then state the research questions that guide this work and describe our intended contributions. In the final section, we provide an overview of the remaining chapters of this thesis.

1.2 Research context

LGBTQ+ young people depend heavily on social platforms to find peer support and explore their identities (DeVito et al., 2018b, 2020; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Haimson et al., 2019; Hanckel et al., 2019). While there has been significant progress in the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in many countries, they still face widespread stigma (Perales & Todd, 2018) which can make it difficult or unsafe for many to express and be open about their identities (Chandra & Hanckel, 2022; DeVito et al., 2018b). A growing body of work within HCI and the humanities has explored how social platforms shape the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people on social platforms (Cho, 2018; DeVito et al., 2018b, 2020; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Hanckel et al., 2019; Orne, 2011). Social platforms can provide LGBTQ+ young people a place to explore their identities and find social support from peers, often without having to disclose being queer or trans to their existing contexts, which may be unsupportive (DeVito et al., 2018b, 2020; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Haimson et al., 2019; Hanckel et al., 2019). However, social platform use can also lead to the unintentional disclosure of their

¹ The author uses first person plural pronouns in this thesis to acknowledge that while this work was his own, his doctoral supervisors have contributed to it through their guidance. As part of *Positionality* (§ 3.4, p. 44), we describe the contributions made by the author and his supervisors, and their relations to the work.

identities or harassment (Cho, 2018; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Orne, 2011).

1.3 Definition of terms

Alt account refers to an “alternate” account that is different to the main account someone has on a platform. **Cisgender** describes someone who is not transgender i.e. a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth (GLAAD, 2023b).

Lateral violence describes harms that are caused by others within the same community, in contrast to harms perpetuated by those outside of the LGBTQ+ community (Scheuerman et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2022). **LGBTQ+** is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. The + recognises all non-straight, non-cisgender identities (GLAAD, 2023a). For stylistic reasons, we alternate between using “LGBTQ+” and “queer and trans”, as together they cover the groups represented in the acronym.

NSFW is an acronym for Not Safe For Work. The term originated to describe content that is not suitable for professional contexts, although it is now often used regardless of context for content that is explicit or graphic. In this thesis, it refers to content or interactions that are sexually explicit (note that in other contexts, content that is graphic or inappropriate in other ways may also be described as NSFW).

Queer describes people whose sexual orientation is not exclusively heterosexual (GLAAD, 2023a).

Thirst trap refers to “a photograph (such as a selfie) or video shared for the purpose of attracting attention or desire” (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, n.d.-b).

Transgender, or **trans**, is an adjective to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth (GLAAD, 2023b).

1.4 Research problem and motivation

Despite the importance of social platforms for queer and trans young people, they are often not considered in the design of such platforms (DeVito et al., 2021b). Similarly, research on how social platform use shapes experiences has often lacked LGBTQ+ perspectives. As Taylor et al. (2024) describe in their literature review of LGBTQ+ related work in major HCI venues, the discipline has lagged behind others in acknowledging and researching the experiences of queer and trans people, and it is only in recent years that such work has gained momentum. Figure 1.1 reproduces a graph showing the papers identified by Taylor et al. (2024). It shows the historical lack of papers acknowledging queer people in HCI and an increase in those that do. However, it also shows that the number of papers they deemed as significantly or exclusively involving queer communities is still relatively low. To contextualise how little HCI work has historically focused on queer people, a search of the ACM Digital Library early on in this research (in 2019), for keywords or paper titles that engage with LGBTQ+ people or queer theory, yielded only 103

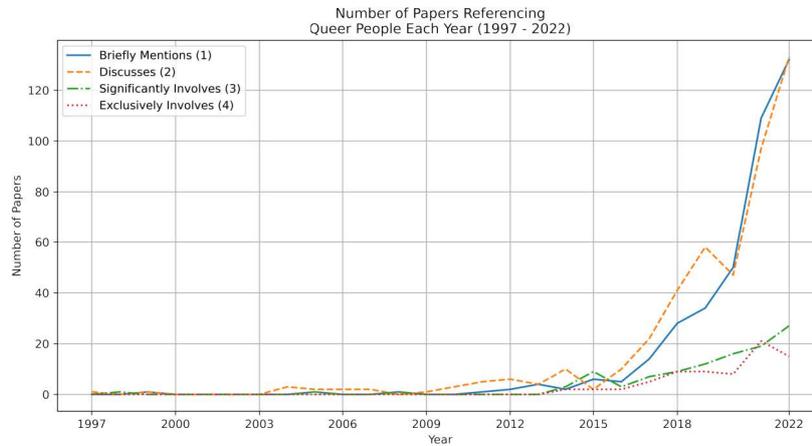


Figure 1.1: A graph showing the number of papers referencing queer people in four main HCI venues in each year from 1997 to 2022. Unmodified original reproduced from Taylor et al. (2024) under a Creative Commons Attribution International 4.0 License.

results out of 2,800,000+ records. There were 70% more results that pertained to the fact that an author’s name was “Gay” and this is despite LGBTQ+ people making up 5-10% of the population (The Lancet, 2016).

The need to include queer perspectives in HCI has been championed by a number of researchers who have called for efforts to be more inclusive of diverse experiences and perspectives. For example, Light (2011) argues that conservatism and technocentrism within HCI threaten to reinforce problematic status quos through a desire to be apolitical or ahistorical. Similarly, Bardzell (2010) warns of the dangers of universalist design which, “demotes cultural, social, regional, and national differences in user experiences and outlooks” and argues that more pluralist design which accounts for the complexity of human experience will likely provide more human-centred outcomes.

As part of the recent work in Queer HCI, there is a growing body of work that explores LGBTQ+ young people’s experiences on social platforms. A number of issues for LGBTQ+ young people with the design of social platforms have been identified as part of such work. As two examples, Carrasco and Kerne (2018) highlight how current designs do not afford enough agency over controlling the audiences content is shared to, and Dietzel (2024) describes issues with consent around explicit pictures on dating apps used by queer men. However, there is comparatively little work that explores how social platform design could be improved to better support the needs of queer and trans young people, or that uses design-led approaches.

In addition, there are limitations with prior work that explores LGBTQ+ young people’s current experiences on social platforms that need to be addressed to provide a more solid foundation for design work. As we argue in *Chapter 2*:

Literature Review, prior work with LGBTQ+ people on social platforms often:

- Focuses on dating and disclosure although that is not a holistic view of how LGBTQ+ young people use social platforms.
- Focuses on specific platforms despite people using a range of platforms in combination with each other.
- Treats dating and hookup apps separately even though they are important sites of community and connection, and are often linked with people's use of other platforms.
- Overlooks the NSFW ways that LGBTQ+ people use social platforms.
- Does not adequately consider how lateral violence and hegemonic masculinity shape queer young mens' experiences on social platforms.
- Does not consider how the design of the social platforms use by participants could be improved.

1.5 Aim and scope

This research aims to explore how social platforms could be better designed for LGBTQ+ young people, focusing specifically on queer young men. To ground these design explorations, it aims to extend current understandings of the way queer and trans young people use social platforms to address the limitations described above. In this section, we describe the scope of this work before stating the research questions in the following section.

1.5.1 Focusing on queer young men

While this research began by focusing on LGBTQ+ young people broadly, the scope narrowed to young men. We conducted this research across three studies², the first of which was an exploratory study to ground the subsequent work. Through this first study, it became clear that while many LGBTQ+ young people share similar experiences of identity formation and navigating heteronormativity, there are differences in experiences between sub-groups within the community and some of the platforms they use. Therefore, we decided to restrict the scope of this research to focus in particular on queer young men. In addition, researching a group within which the author is an insider provided him access to the community and allowed him to be sensitive to the issues discussed by participants and supported rapport³.

Restricting the demographic involved in the research reduces the applicability of findings from the second and third studies beyond queer (and trans) men to other parts of the LGBTQ+ community. However, it enabled deeper and more nuanced explorations of experiences within this sub-group. As Taylor et al. (2024) note in their review of work in Queer HCI, little research focuses on specific queer populations. As they argue, "in making queer people legible to outsiders, we must

² See *Research studies* (§ 3.3, p. 41) for more details.

³ See *Positionality* (§ 3.4, p. 44) for a more detailed statement of our relations to this work.

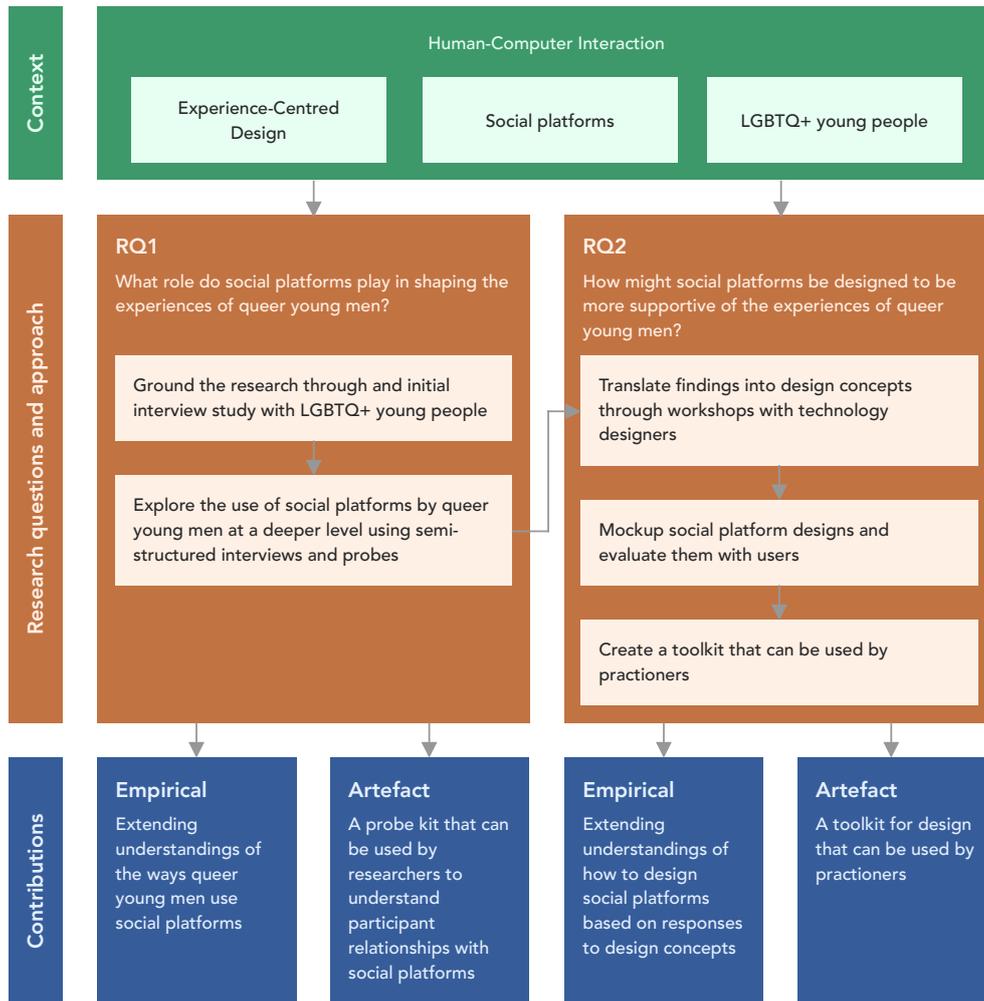


Figure 1.2: An overview of this research showing the context, RQs, approach and intended contributions.

not lose sight of differences within the queer community. We suggest that greater specificity – a deeper understanding of highly particular, intersectional experiences – will help Queer HCI researchers embrace the nuances of our community” (Taylor et al., 2024, p. 12).

1.5.2 Restricting the age of participants

Following other work with LGBTQ+ young people (Fox & Ralston, 2016; McConnell et al., 2017), we focus on the experiences of participants between 18 and 28. Two other considerations supported this decision. Firstly, this work explores participants’ practices on dating apps and in NSFW contexts, adult places where minors should not be. Secondly, there are important generational differences in the ways LGBTQ+ people in Australia use social platforms (Robards et al., 2019).

1.5.3 Including a wide range of social platforms

As noted above, prior work exploring LGBTQ+ young people's use of social platforms often focuses on specific platforms. However, since people often use a range of platforms in concert, for example, considering the distinct audiences and affordances of each of their social platform accounts when deciding where to post content (DeVito et al., 2018b; Zhao et al., 2016), focusing on a specific platform is unlikely to result in a holistic picture of people's experiences. Similarly, the way prior work often studies dating and hookup platforms separately from other platforms neglects the important role that they can play as sites of connection within LGBTQ+ communities (Byron et al., 2021). Consequently, this research is not restricted to specific platforms and instead invites participants to draw on their experiences across all of the social platforms they use, including dating and hookup apps.

1.6 Research questions and intended contributions

In this section, we introduce the research questions and intended contributions. Figure 1.2 provides a visual overview of this work including showing the approach taken to answer the research questions and link them to the contributions.

Based on the aims stated above, two research questions drive this work (motivated in detail by Chapter 2's literature review):

- RQ 1 What role do social platforms play in shaping the experiences of queer young men?
- RQ 2 How might social platforms be designed to be more supportive of the experiences of queer young men?

There are four intended contributions for this research. The first is to extend current understandings of how the design of social platform shapes the experiences of queer young men by conducting a holistic study that addresses limitations in prior work. The second is to provide a probe kit that can be used by researchers to understand participant experiences with and their perceptions of the social platforms they use. The third intended contribution is to provide design recommendations for how to improve social platform experiences for queer young men. The fourth is translating these recommendations and the actionable design concepts that have been developed into an online design resource that can be used by social platform designers to improve experiences for queer young men.

While this work focuses on queer young men, contributing to the growing body of work in HCI surrounding the experiences of LGBTQ+ people can also positively impact how technology is understood and designed for all (DeVito et al., 2020;

DeVito et al., 2021a). As Queer HCI researchers have argued, work that involves queer and trans communities can offer a unique perspective to identity management and online communities, among other areas (DeVito et al., 2020; DeVito et al., 2021a).

1.7 Thesis structure

The chapters that follow are divided into four parts which we now describe.

1.7.1 Part I: Background

The first part provides the background for the thesis over two chapters. The first describes our review of the literature while the second details our methodology.

Chapter 2: Literature Review provides an overview of prior work relevant to this research and concludes by summarising identified limitations and establishing research questions. It starts by introducing the field of Queer HCI, describing the growing body of work that constitutes it and critiques that have been levied. We then introduce heteronormativity and minority stress as a frame to differentiate the experiences of queer and trans people on social platforms from those of their cisgender-heterosexual peers. Following this, we describe how LGBTQ+ people curate their presentations online, especially as it relates to their identity, drawing on heteronormative self-presentation research as a foundation. We then describe the way social platforms can be used to learn about what it means to be LGBTQ+ and find connections to others in the community. Subsequently, we describe work involving dating apps, arguing for their inclusion in social platform research, describing the way they are used, and highlighting issues with their current design. We then describe practices around posting and sharing NSFW content, as well as highlighting the more social sides of the communities where this happens. Following this, we describe lateral violence perpetuated against LGBTQ+ people from others inside the community. In the penultimate section, we describe prior design work that has focused on the community. Finally, we summarise our critiques of prior work and present the research questions that motivate this research.

Chapter 3: Methodology describes the methodological approach taken in this research. We start by arguing the importance of choosing an approach that considers three factors, namely experience, participation and design. It then provides an overview of a number of approaches considered for this work before describing the chosen approach, Experience-Centred Design. We then outline the multi-study approach we took in this work, providing an overview of each, and describing how they relate to each other. We then discuss the positionality of the author and his doctoral supervisors who helped guide this work. Following this, we provide an overview of the way we collected data and analysed it across the three studies. Finally, we detail ethical considerations and procedures related to this work.

1.7.2 Part II: Investigating current social platform experiences

This part focuses on addressing the first research question and is comprised of three chapters. The first two chapters describe empirical studies that we conducted, and the third discusses their findings.

In *Chapter 4: Study 1* we detail the first study that we used to ground this work. We start by describing how we carried out the study including our recruitment of 9 LGBTQ+ young people, the semi-structured interviews we conducted and the subsequent analysis of interview transcripts using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. We then present our findings, six themes which relate to different stages of participants' journeys from self-discovery and acceptance, to living in the closet, coming out and life beyond.

In *Chapter 5: Study 2* we describe the second study which used semi-structured interviews and a custom-designed probe kit to explore the social platform experiences of 24 queer young men. The chapter starts by describing the history of probes as a method before detailing the design of the probe kit. We then describe the method we followed for this study including how we recruited participants, conducted semi-structured interviews, managed probe delivery and returns, and analysed the data we collected. Following this, the rest of the chapter details our findings across six overarching themes: *Engaging with LGBTQ+ content*, *Curating disclosure*, *Wrestling with the pressure to conform to the image of an ideal queer man*, *Curating an attractive image*, *Sharing less idealised presentations*, and *Finding and interacting with peers*.

Concluding this part, in *Chapter 6: RQ 1 Discussion* we discuss our findings from the first two studies. We do this across five main sections which group our findings: *Social platforms are vital for developing identity and finding community*, *Curating disclosure and beyond*, *How idealisation shapes experiences*, *Dating apps are a double-edged sword*, *Social platforms are used in NSFW ways*.

1.7.3 Part III: Designing to improve social platform experiences

This part builds on the previous, using our findings to ground the research through design approach we take to answering the second research question.

In *Chapter 7: Study 3*, we present the third and final study we conducted as part of this research. After introducing the study, we describe how we facilitated co-design workshops with technology designers, created mockups from the resulting concepts, and evaluated them in group sessions with participants. We then present each of the design mockups. The rest of the chapter describes findings from the evaluation sessions through four overarching themes: *Providing more opportunities for consent and clarifying expectations*, *Providing more agency over self-presentation*, *Providing*

transparency and control over automated, algorithmic and AI features and Providing ways to connect with local communities.

Following this, in *Chapter 8: RQ 2 Discussion*, we discuss our findings in response to the second research question. We draw on our findings from the evaluation sessions in *Study 3*, as well as the findings from *Part II* where relevant, to describe a number of design recommendations and challenges. Our recommendations fall into three broad categories: *Give people more agency over their experiences on social platforms*, *Help people to navigate mismatched expectations and improve consent over NSFW content*, and *Help people to connect to community*. We then describe three open challenges for design: *Protecting safety while maintaining anonymity*, *Balancing authenticity and idealised content*, *Matching people beyond physical appearance*.

In *Chapter 9: Design resource*, we describe the creation of an online design resource for social platform designers. It takes our design recommendations from *Chapter 8: RQ 2 Discussion*, as well as the concepts from *Study 3* and the probe kit from *Study 2*, and shares them with social platform designers as part of an interactive web based design resource. We start the chapter by describing how we conceptualised the resource and our design considerations. We then present the resource, describing the design decisions we made as part of its creation. Finally, we detail the technical decisions we made in creating it.

1.7.4 Part IV: Conclusion

In the final chapter, *Chapter 10: Thesis contributions*, we conclude the thesis and discuss our contributions. We start by providing a brief overview of the thesis and summarising our discussions from *Chapter 6: RQ 1 Discussion* and *Chapter 8: RQ 2 Discussion*. We then describe the four contributions of this thesis: *Empirical contribution: broadening understandings of how social platforms shape the experiences of queer young men*, *Artefact contribution: a probe kit to understand social platform experiences*, *Empirical contribution: extending understandings of how to design social platforms to be supportive of the experiences of queer young men*, and *Artefact contribution: a design resource for social platform designers*. Following this, we describe the limitations of our research and discuss directions for future work. Finally, we end this thesis with concluding remarks.

Part I

Background

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter includes updated and extended versions of earlier literature reviews published in Armstrong and Leong (2019) and Armstrong et al. (2024) ¹.

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we review literature related to queer young men and social platforms to provide background to this work and motivate our research questions. We start by describing Queer HCI, highlighting its growth in recent years, drawing on critiques that only certain aspects of LGBTQ+ experience have been focused on, and describing the importance of continuing work in the area. Following this, we describe heteronormativity and minority stress, arguing that they shape LGBTQ+ experiences. In the subsequent five sections, we describe various aspects of social platform use: how people curate disclosure of LGBTQ+ identities, the way platforms can help people learn about being queer or trans, the role of dating apps, how people use social platforms in NSFW ways, and how lateral violence plays out through racism and performances of hegemonic masculinity.

As highlighted in the introduction ², while queer people share many common experiences, there are nuances in the experiences of subgroups within the community. A large proportion of the related work includes participants from across a range of queer identities. As this work mainly focuses on the experiences of queer young men, we present related work in the context of how it applies to this group.

2.2 Queer HCI

Work that explores the experiences of LGBTQ+ people within HCI has grown in recent years (Taylor et al., 2024). However, research lags behind other fields and

¹ See *Papers published* (§ D, p. 321) for full versions of these papers.

² See *Focusing on queer young men* (§ 1.5.1, p. 5).

there are significant gaps (DeVito et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2024). For example, Taylor et al. (2024) in their systematic review of queer literature in HCI’s main venues³, noted that queer online communities were studied in media disciplines decades earlier than they were in HCI. As they describe, the first papers in major venues that focused exclusively on LGBTQ+ participant experiences were published in 2014 (Taylor et al., 2024).

This growing body of work has come to be described under the banner of “Queer HCI” following a number of Special Interest Groups (SIGs) at the ACM CHI conferences between 2019 and 2021 (DeVito et al., 2020; DeVito et al., 2021a; Spiel et al., 2019). As Taylor et al. (2024, p. 1) note, Queer HCI is “roughly composed of three overlapping groups: (1) queer researchers regardless of what they research, (2) those researching queer people, and (3) those leveraging queer theory”.

While work involving queer and trans people has covered a number of topics, there have been critiques that much of the work only focuses on narrow areas of queer life. For example, the 2019 CHI SIG on Queering HCI (Spiel et al., 2019) notes that most empirical work has focused on dating and disclosure of LGBTQ+ identities and points out that these are narrow slices of queer and trans experiences. The critique that too much work focuses narrowly on identity disclosure is echoed by Taylor et al. (2024) who, at a higher level, argue that there is an overemphasis on resisting marginalisation or stigmatisation. While they note that these are very real concerns for the LGBTQ+ community⁴, they argue for additional research that explores beyond trauma and to more positive queer and trans experiences (Taylor et al., 2024).

A related critique made by Taylor et al. (2024) is that queer and trans people are often used as case studies for existing HCI research areas. In one of the examples they provide, they describe how LGBTQ+ identity disclosure is a useful application area for privacy researchers. As they elaborate, such research can make important theoretical contributions. Indeed, the Queer HCI SIG at CHI has highlighted how contributing to the growing body of work in HCI surrounding the experiences of LGBTQ+ people can also positively impact how technology is understood and designed for all (DeVito et al., 2020; DeVito et al., 2021a). In particular, they emphasised that work involving queer and trans communities can offer a unique perspective to identity management and online communities, among other areas (DeVito et al., 2020; DeVito et al., 2021a). However, Taylor et al. (2024) argue that while such work can be useful, there should be more work that goes beyond the narrow areas of LGBTQ+ experience that fit existing HCI research areas.

³ Taylor et al. (2024) focus on papers published across the HCI venues of CHI, CSCW, DIS, and TOCHI.

⁴ See *Heteronormativity and minority stress* (§ 2.3, p. 14) for discussion of such issues.

2.3 Heteronormativity and minority stress

Research shows that social platform use by LGBTQ+ people can lead to distress, with the potential for them to experience victimisation or discrimination (Carrasco & Kerne, 2018; Haimson et al., 2015; McConnell et al., 2017; Scheuerman et al., 2018). For example, LGBTQ+ youth are 2-3 times more likely to be cyber-bullying targets (McConnell et al., 2017).

This section starts by introducing the concepts of heteronormativity and minority stress to argue why the experiences of queer young men (and of LGBTQ+ people more generally) may be different to those of their cisgender heterosexual peers. It then describes the Australian context in which this research took place before exploring the impact this has on decisions to disclose identity and how intersectional identities can impact this. Finally, it argues that heteronormativity and minority stress are a reason to design social platforms in ways that support queer and trans young people's agency over the way they present on social platforms.

2.3.1 Defining heteronormativity and minority stress

Schilt and Westbrook (2009, p. 441) (citing Kitzinger (2005)) describe heteronormativity as the "suite of cultural, legal, and institutional practices that maintain normative assumptions that there are two and only two genders, that gender reflects biological sex, and that only sexual attraction between these 'opposite' genders is natural or acceptable". For LGBTQ+ people, heteronormativity dictates the problematic societal expectation for them to be cisgender, heterosexual, and conform to norms around how they ought to behave and present.

Heteronormativity impacts the well-being of LGBTQ+ people through minority stress. Minority stress is the additional burden on the experiences of those belonging to minority groups (Meyer, 1995, 2003). For LGBTQ+ people, it results from structural stigmatisation of their identities and it has been used to explain a range of mental and physical health disparities (Meyer, 2003; Pitoňák, 2017; Williams & Mann, 2017). For example, experiencing prejudice, discrimination or violence within a high stigma environment contributes significantly (Meyer, 2003; Perales & Todd, 2018; Pitoňák, 2017). These experiences or exposure to stigmatising environments may also be internalised and further contribute, for example through internalised homophobia, and expectations of rejection or victimisation (Meyer, 2003; Pitoňák, 2017).

2.3.2 The Australian context

While attitudes to LGBTQ+ people in Australia are in the "upper-middle of progressiveness" on a global scale, structural stigma still remains (Perales & Todd, 2018, p. 192). For example, the Australian Government ran a postal survey in 2017

to determine support for marriage equality. While it led to the amendment of the Marriage Act to allow marriage equality, there was great geographical variation in the results. For example, the proportion of eligible voters who voted no ranged from 13.1% within the City of Sydney to 55.5% in Blaxland, an electorate approximately 60km to the west (Perales & Todd, 2018). Although a positive outcome, the societal conversation it created surrounding LGBTQ+ rights caused great distress to queer and trans Australians (Perales & Todd, 2018; Storr et al., 2022). Discrimination and harassment still remains a significant problem. For example, a significant proportion of queer and trans young men in an Australian study (Hill et al., 2021) had, based on their sexuality or gender, experienced verbal harassment (cisgender 45%, transgender 63.3%), physical harassment (cisgender 12%, transgender 16.8%) or sexual harassment (cisgender 21.1%, transgender 23.2%).

2.3.3 Impact on disclosure

Due to heteronormativity and fears around disclosing being LGBTQ+, many queer and trans young men decide to conceal their identities. However, this can further exacerbate minority stress and social isolation (Pitoňák, 2017). Prior work has identified social support, especially from family, peers or supportive schooling environments, as a protective factor against minority stress (Meyer, 2003; Perales & Todd, 2018; Pitoňák, 2017). Many may choose to reveal their identities only in certain contexts employing what Orne (2011) describes as “strategic outness”. This can allow them to express being queer or trans and receive social support from supportive contexts, both of which can positively impact their well-being (Pitoňák, 2017). Evidence of strategic outness can be seen in research from Australia, where queer and trans young men were more likely to have disclosed their identities to friends than family, classmates, or teachers (Hill et al., 2021).

2.3.4 Intersectional experiences of heteronormativity

Race and cultural background can shape how LGBTQ+ people experience heteronormativity and minority stress in complex ways (Nadal et al., 2015; Sadika et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2022). Research exploring this often cites intersectionality theory – proposed by Crenshaw (1989) who argued that viewing marginalisation only through a single identity means that those with multiply marginalised identities can be erased. Similarly, race and cultural background can also shape how queer young men experience and choose to disclose their queerness⁵ (Sadika et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2022). For example, Sadika et al. (2020, p. 132) noted in their systematic review of literature related to LGBTQ+ People of Colour’s experiences that perceptions and experiences of coming out can “differ fundamentally from those of White LGBTQ+ persons”. Similarly, Tran et al. (2022, p. 6) describes

⁵ Beyond affecting interactions with those outside the community, race and cultural background can also shape experiences with others in the LGBTQ+ community, as is explored in *Lateral violence within the queer community* (§ 2.8, p. 29).

expectations to disclose queerness in “white discourse” as a “luxury that many LGBTQ+ people of color cannot afford”. Sadika et al. (2020) found that this was often attributed to differences in cultural acceptance of being queer or trans but also to differences in familial relationships and expectations compared to Western norms. For example, research with Chinese young men living in Canada found that many were apprehensive to “come out” to others with a Chinese background, especially their parents and those of older generations (Huang & Fang, 2019). Sadika et al. (2020, p. 132) summarises their findings:

“For Chinese gay men, concerns about coming out stemmed from a number of factors. These included the incongruity between Chinese identities and sexual diversity; a pathological view of “homosexuality;” anti-gay beliefs based on Christianity; filial piety (i.e., respect for one’s parents, elders, and ancestors in accordance with Confucian and Chinese Buddhist ethics); and the cultural expectations for men to perform their masculine roles, have a heterosexual marriage, and have children. As well, participants asserted that, if they were out to their ethnic communities and families, they would experience feelings of exclusion.”

2.3.5 Heteronormativity as a reason to support agency over disclosure of identity

Heteronormativity and attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people have a significant impact on how, to who and whether queer and trans young people choose to disclose their identities. It is important then, to allow them agency over disclosure and to design social platforms that support this and protect their privacy. As Sannon and Forte (2022) note, privacy is crucial for marginalised groups as they can be exposed to greater harm by stigmatising environments when compromised. The following section explores the ways in which queer and trans people manage the disclosure of their identities on social platforms.

2.4 Curating disclosure of identity

As a result of heteronormativity, stigmatisation of queerness and minority stress, many LGBTQ+ young people curate their presentations to conceal their identities. To provide background for exploring the ways LGBTQ+ young people do this, this section starts by first introducing heteronormative literature describing Goffman’s (1959) theory of impression management and how it has been used to describe people’s behaviour on social platforms. It then turns to work exploring LGBTQ+ people’s curation practices on social platforms, before discussing various barriers to effective curation practices due to of the design of social platforms. The section ends by describing design efforts to improve curation on social platforms.

2.4.1 Impression management on social platforms

Seminal work by Goffman (1959) explored how people curate their self-presentation across different contexts to manage the impressions they want to create. Using a metaphor of theatre, Goffman (1959) described how people target their presentation between “front-stage” performances, where they have to be more respectable, and more private “back-stage” performances, where they are able to subvert this, a process he termed “impression management”. Research in HCI has drawn on Goffman’s (1959) work to explore how, much like in the physical world, people manage their self-presentation across various contexts online (e.g., Duguay, 2016; Hanckel et al., 2019; Hogan, 2010; Marwick and boyd, 2011, 2014). In doing so, they draw on impression management as a frame for understanding how people target performances of self based on perceived online audiences (Hogan, 2010). We refer to this process as *curation* following others (Chandra & Hanckel, 2022; Cho, 2018; Gulotta et al., 2012; Hanckel et al., 2019).

Curation is essential on social platforms because they can combine multiple contexts into one (Marwick & boyd, 2011). For example, one may use Facebook with both family and work colleagues, contexts which may otherwise have stayed entirely separate. “Context collapse” is the phenomenon when different contexts unexpectedly clash on social platforms, making it harder to target performances to a particular context (Marwick & boyd, 2011). The potential for unwanted context collapse means people must intentionally curate their self-presentation on social platforms. Prior work has found that people may choose to curate a self-presentation which is appropriate for all contexts in one’s audience to avoid the potential for context collapse, i.e. only posting things that they feel comfortable sharing with all the various family members, colleagues and friends that form their online audience (Hogan, 2010). Alternatively, some choose to take more active curatorial approaches, such as by limiting the visibility of posts or profiles and using multiple platforms or accounts (DeVito et al., 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2014; Zhao et al., 2016).

While many studies have focused on exploring self-presentation within the context of a single social platform, it is increasingly evident that people make decisions about curation across the ecosystem of social platforms they use (DeVito et al., 2018b; Zhao et al., 2016). Each platform’s distinct audiences and specifics shape people’s curation practices. By utilising multiple platforms, or even multiple accounts on platforms which afford this, people have more agency to curate differing audiences and targeted self-presentations on each (DeVito et al., 2018b; Zhao et al., 2016). Each account can have a distinct, if sometimes overlapping, curated audience of people who can see one’s profile content, reducing the potential for context collapse (DeVito et al., 2018b; Huang & Vitak, 2022; Zhao et al., 2016). For example, one may choose to have a front-stage presentation on Facebook which has an audience made up of people from a range of contexts while keeping back-stage performances to an Instagram account that only close friends know about. People may even choose to use pseudonyms to make it harder for others to find their accounts,

helping to maintain this separation (Zhao et al., 2016). On the other hand, some choose to explicitly link to their other accounts so that they can be discovered, and audiences can be shared between accounts (Huang & Vitak, 2022; Zhao et al., 2016).

In addition to differences in audiences, each platform has its own norms and affordances that shape how it is used. For example, Zhao et al. (2016) found that Facebook is perceived to be a place for “personal” presentations even if people have an audience there that may also include colleagues. While it may be a place for “personal” presentations, it is not necessarily a back-stage space. They also found that Facebook is a place for highly curated posts that present the best content. In contrast, they identify Twitter ⁶ as a platform where people may focus on expressing where they are at or venting without the expectation of audience interaction or feedback.

2.4.2 Curating disclosure

For queer and trans young men, strategic outness often continues on social platforms. For example, by disclosing and expressing their queerness in ways that only supportive audiences will be able to see (Carrasco & Kerne, 2018; DeVito et al., 2018a; Duguay, 2016; Hanckel et al., 2019). Audiences and affordances can vary across accounts, creating varying risk factors when expressing and disclosing being LGBTQ+ (DeVito et al., 2018b; Duguay, 2016). For example, Facebook audiences may be more likely to include unsupportive family members than other platforms (DeVito et al., 2018b). In addition, Facebook is a platform whose design and policies enforce using “real names”, whereas Instagram affords more ability to be anonymous (Hanckel et al., 2019). By using a combination of accounts, LGBTQ+ young people can be strategic about curating where and to whom they present their identities (Carrasco & Kerne, 2018; DeVito et al., 2018b; Hanckel et al., 2019).

While LGBTQ+ young people use many of the same platforms as their heteronormative peers, the norms of specific platforms can vary. For example, while in heteronormative studies, participants described Facebook as a place for “personal” presentations (Zhao et al., 2016), queer and trans people often feel they must curate out their identities on the platform. Family is a context in which many LGBTQ+ young people do not feel comfortable disclosing their identities (Chandra & Hanckel, 2022; DeVito et al., 2018b; Hanckel et al., 2019; Hill et al., 2021; Talbot et al., 2022). This means that Facebook, where there is often an expectation of being “friends” with one’s family, can be a place where LGBTQ+ young people have to curate out their identity (Chandra & Hanckel, 2022; Talbot et al., 2022). Alternatively, they may choose to use Facebook as a place where they are open about being LGBTQ+ but restrict what family members can access or even block or deny friend requests from them (Chandra & Hanckel, 2022; DeVito et al., 2018b;

⁶ Since starting this research, Twitter has been taken over by Elon Musk, which has resulted in changes to the culture of the platform, as well as, more recently, its name change to “X” (Romano, 2023). The Twitter described by participants and in prior work is not necessarily the same as the platform now known as “X”. For this reason, we continue to refer to the platform as “Twitter” in this thesis.

Hanckel et al., 2019).

In contrast to practices of concealment, some work has also described people disclose their identities on social platforms, often implicitly. Work describing implicit disclosures of LGBTQ+ identities have often referenced what Marwick and boyd (2014) define as “social stenography” where only those in the intended audience are able to interpret the hidden meaning of profile content. For example, Pinch et al. (2024) describe how LGBTQ+ people may rely on ambiguous associations in content that they post so that their identity is communicated to some but hidden from homophobic others who may not have the context needed to interpret it. However, the ways that LGBTQ+ young people use social platforms to explicitly disclose their identities has received less attention.

2.4.3 Challenges to curation

While LGBTQ+ young people can use various strategies to curate audiences and manage privacy, there are barriers and risks to using social platforms in this way. For example, context collapse can occur and be detrimental for LGBTQ+ people when it inadvertently discloses their identities. Despite the various affordances provided by social platforms for people to curate their self-presentation, their technical and often rigidly defined implementations can leave a lot to be desired when trying to navigate the often complex and messy reality of social interaction (Marwick & boyd, 2014; Zhao et al., 2016). For example, the granularity of privacy controls on Facebook, where each post can have its own privacy setting, while powerful, can make curation complicated and labour intensive (Marwick & boyd, 2014). On the other hand, the binary options on platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, where posts are either all public or all only visible to followers, can lead to challenges and frustrations with their rigidity (Huang & Vitak, 2022; Zhao et al., 2016). Despite the use of privacy settings, the networked nature of social platforms means that other people’s use of them may lead to context collapse. For example, if a third party creates a post that tags one on Facebook, by default, it will appear on their timeline, and their privacy settings will determine its audience. Similarly, on Twitter, if one’s account is private but someone with a public account replies to one’s tweet, that is publicly visible and may be revealing (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Additionally, interacting with content on social platforms can often create traces over which there are minimal privacy controls. For example, RSVPing to a queer event might automatically create a post which announces this interaction to one’s entire Facebook network (Carrasco & Kerne, 2018).

As Carrasco and Kerne (2018) argue, platforms do not allow LGBTQ+ people enough flexibility over the visibility of their profiles and content. Similarly Haimson et al. (2016), note that curation and privacy affordances often apply only to the content of one’s posts and not to profile attributes such as names, about sections or profile pictures. This creates barriers, for example, for trans people who wish to present a name or gender identity to supportive audiences but not to others.

2.4.4 Designing to improve curatorial affordances

This section has introduced theory around self-presentation in heteronormative research, described how LGBTQ+ young people curate the disclosure of their identities on social platforms, and highlighted challenges they face in doing so. Given the importance of providing queer and trans young people agency over disclosure of their identities and protecting them from the harms associated with inadvertent disclosure, there have been calls to improve the design of curation and privacy affordances on social platforms in LGBTQ+ focused research. For example, Carrasco and Kerne (2018) recommend designing to increase “selective visibility”. However, such recommendations often stop short of designing how such features could work or evaluating them which reduces their actionability.

In addressing this gap, there is also an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the ways queer young men curate their self-presentations. Given the continued stigmatisation of LGBTQ+ identities, it is unsurprising that most work in this area focuses on safety and reducing harm by exposing issues in current systems and aiming to design social platforms in ways that prevent unintentional disclosure – this is vital work to protect queer and trans people. However, this focus can overlook the other ways LGBTQ+ people curate their presentations. As Taylor et al. (2024, p. 12) argue, “while coming out or identity disclosure is often a lifelong project for queer people, it is only a small part of LGBTQ+ people’s lives [yet] identity disclosure is one of the most heavily studied aspects of queer people’s lives in HCI research”. While curation of presentation on dating apps is another area of focus, as we describe below ⁷, there is a dearth of work that explores beyond these two topics. For example, while there is heteronormative literature that describes how people use alt-accounts to target distinct audiences, such as papers that talk about “fake” Instagram accounts or “finstas” (e.g., Huang and Vitak, 2022; Xiao et al., 2020), there is little work that explores similar practices among LGBTQ+ people beyond concealment of identity.

Although there is work to be done to design better curatorial affordances for LGBTQ+ young people on social platforms, the existing affordances do allow some degree of agency over disclosure. This can allow queer and trans young people the ability to avoid harm from inadvertent disclosure and crucially, as the next section describes, allows them to use social platforms to explore their identities and engage with peers.

2.5 Learning about and engaging in the queer community

Social platforms provide a place for queer young men to learn about being queer and find social support from others. Due to heteronormativity, queer young men have to

⁷ See *Curating presentation on dating apps* (§ 2.6.3, p. 24).

explore and make sense of their identities in ways that their cisgender heterosexual peers do not (Fox & Ralston, 2016). Making this more difficult, many queer young men may not have supportive relationships with role models or peers who they can talk to or learn from (McConnell et al., 2017). In this section, we describe how social platforms can help queer and trans young people learn about being LGBTQ+ from online content and provide connections to peers, before highlighting the importance of anonymity in enabling this, and arguing that more research is needed in this area.

2.5.1 Learning about being LGBTQ+ from online content

Social platforms are often a site of learning for LGBTQ+ young people (Byron et al., 2019; Delmonaco & Haimson, 2023; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Gray, 2009; Simpson & Semaan, 2021). Through social platforms, they can be exposed to queer and trans content, and see how others present themselves (Byron et al., 2019; Fox & Ralston, 2016). In addition, prior work has often explored how LGBTQ+ young people learn about sexual health on social platforms (Delmonaco & Haimson, 2023; Fox & Ralston, 2016).

While some may seek out information relating to being queer or trans, social platforms can provide exposure to topics LGBTQ+ young people are not aware of, prompting them to start intentionally looking for similar content, information or resources (Delmonaco & Haimson, 2023; Simpson & Semaan, 2021). For example, Simpson and Semaan (2021) found that their participants would interact with LGBTQ+ content on TikTok in an attempt to train their algorithm to see more of it. However, many of their participants highlighted frustrations at the content they were being served, and the lack of direct control over the algorithm.

2.5.2 Providing connections to peers

Social platforms often provide a place where queer young men can seek out social support from supportive communities online as they begin to construct their identities (Fox & Ralston, 2016; McConnell et al., 2017). While heteronormative research around the psychological outcomes of social platform use has suggested that using them to compensate for lack of offline connections can lead to increased loneliness (Clark et al., 2018), their ability to facilitate interactions with online peers can enable queer young people to feel less isolated (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Gray, 2009). These interactions are particularly vital when individuals do not have existing relationships with supportive figures or peers (McConnell et al., 2017) and the social support they find can act as a protective factor against minority stress (Pitoňák, 2017).

Dating apps, which we discuss below ⁸, are sometimes included as part of work exploring how queer and trans young people learn about their identities (e.g., Fox

⁸ See *Using dating and hookup apps* (§ 2.6, p. 23).

and Ralston, 2016), however, they are often studied separately (e.g., Wongsomboon et al., 2023). Prior work has found that many queer young men turn to Grindr, or other dating apps, as a way to meet peers, but that experiences on such apps can be negative or overwhelming, especially at first (Byron et al., 2021; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Wongsomboon et al., 2022).

2.5.3 Anonymity as an enabling factor

The anonymity that social platforms can provide can be crucial in the early stages of developing one's identity and as a result they have become an essential tool for queer young people (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Scheuerman et al., 2018). As described in *Impact on disclosure* (§ 2.3.3, p. 15), during the early stages of exploring their identities or especially if they are in an unsupportive familial or schooling context, queer young men may be fearful of disclosing their queerness to anyone in their existing networks. Compared to physical spaces that once upon a time were the main way to meet other LGBTQ+ people, online spaces may provide a safer way to connect with peers (Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014). Feelings of anonymity are also crucial in the early stages of developing one's identity due to fear of disclosure (Fox & Ralston, 2016). The importance of anonymity can be seen in research about the queer community on Tumblr. Byron (2019) notes how the anonymity afforded by the site enables greater honesty and gives queer users a space to experiment with their identity. In addition, anonymity affords users the ability to have less specific or static representations of their identity. This is particularly supportive of gender-diverse individuals who may have emergent or fluid gender identities (Byron et al., 2019; Haimson et al., 2015).

These contexts where queer youth can interact with peers they know will be supportive and do not have to worry about context collapse allow them the freedom to perform and explore their identities without curating out their queerness (as they may have to do in other contexts) (Carrasco & Kerne, 2018). Additionally, there is likely to be less pressure to explicitly self-disclose or explain one's queerness. Heteronormativity means that in many cases, people are assumed to be cisgender and heterosexual until they state or explain otherwise. This is often not the case in online queer spaces or amongst queer peers. As Carrasco and Kerne (2018, p. 1) writes, "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".

2.5.4 Limitations of existing work

As Fox and Ralston (2016) argue, much of the research around information seeking by LGBTQ+ young people on social platforms focuses on health, either sexual (e.g., Delmonaco and Haimson, 2023) or mental (e.g., Byron, 2023). Such work makes important contributions, highlighting how social platforms help LGBTQ+ young people and often arguing for recommendations related to policy or service provision. However, like Fox and Ralston (2016), we see a need for more work that explores

beyond these areas. While there has been some work that looks at how to improve design of social platforms to better support information seeking, often this has been done within closed platforms (e.g., ‘Queer Safe(r) Spaces’, 2023). Given that people often stumble across content that helps them learn about being LGBTQ+ on mainstream platforms without intentionally looking for it (Delmonaco & Haimson, 2023), we see a need to explore how the design of the platforms people already use could be improved to support such uses.

2.6 Using dating and hookup apps

Dating apps are widely used by queer and trans young men and for varied purposes. Researchers have noted, especially amongst gay men, how dating apps are increasingly replacing offline queer spaces such as bars due to the convenience and anonymity they afford when seeking connection to others (Miller, 2015). In the sections that follow, we describe commonly studied dating apps, highlight issues around consent, discuss how people curate their presentations on them, and point to ways that people protect their safety. We end this section by arguing the need to include dating apps as part of broader social platform research.

2.6.1 Apps and their varied uses

Grindr, a location-based people nearby application targeted primarily at queer men, has received the most attention and is one of the most widely used applications (Byron et al., 2021; Hardy & Lindtner, 2017). Although Grindr was initially created for queer men seeking hookups, it is also a place where other forms of connection can be sought, for example, romantic partners or friendship (Blackwell et al., 2015; Byron et al., 2021; Hardy & Lindtner, 2017; Zytka et al., 2022). Despite this, many still see Grindr as a place predominantly for hookups and this can cause issues when people try to use it for other things⁹ (Blackwell et al., 2015; Choi & Bauermeister, 2022; Wongsomboon et al., 2023). In addition, and as we describe below¹⁰, prior work has often highlight the prevalence of lateral violence on the platform.

Tinder, a dating app which is not targeted at specific genders or sexualities has also received a lot of attention in the literature. As Tinder is not an LGBTQ+ focused dating app, much of the work is heteronormative in nature (e.g., Krüger and Charlotte Spilde, 2020; Ward, 2017), although there is some work that explores its use by queer and trans people (e.g., Byron et al., 2021; Dietzel, 2024). While some findings from heteronormative work around Tinder can be transferable to queer and trans people’s experiences, this is not necessarily always the case. For example, while many heterosexual men view Tinder as a place to find casual sex (Zytka et al., 2022), queer men may see the app as more dating orientated in comparison to apps like Grindr that are more sexualised (MacKee, 2016).

⁹ See *Issues with how sexualised dating apps can be* (§ 2.6.2, p. 24).

¹⁰ See *Lateral violence within the queer community* (§ 2.8, p. 29).

Most of the research that has been done on dating apps has focused on specific apps, usually Grindr or Tinder. Although some work has been platform agnostic, it has usually been outside of HCI and not included discussion comparing how the design of each shapes experiences (e.g., Byron et al., 2021; Wongsomboon et al., 2023). Similarly, while there are other dating apps targeted specifically at queer men, these have received less attention in the literature with some exceptions. For example, Hardy and Lindtner (2017) and Roth (2014) both describe Scruff, as “a geosocial network targeted primarily at bears (and their admirers)” Roth, 2014, pp. 2113, however, most work focuses solely on Grindr.

2.6.2 Issues with how sexualised dating apps can be

Prior work with queer young men has highlighted that issues around consent on social platforms are prevalent (Dietzel, 2022, 2024). On dating apps, mismatched expectations between users about what they are for can lead to negative experiences (Brubaker et al., 2016; Wongsomboon et al., 2023). Those seeking forms of connection other than hookups on dating apps may also be less satisfied with their experiences (Brubaker et al., 2016; Choi & Bauermeister, 2022). Additionally, as Wongsomboon et al. (2023, p. 8) note, “the sexualized culture of adult online dating communities (aimed largely at cisgender sexual minority men) can be intimidating for adolescents and youth experiencing such culture for the first time”. Similarly, research by Zytka et al. (2021) with both queer and non-queer participants who use Tinder found that people often assume others are on the app solely to look for sex, even if someone’s profile states otherwise. As Zytka et al. (2021) describes, incorrect assumptions about what others were looking for could lead to mismatched expectations or sexual violence.

2.6.3 Curating presentation on dating apps

User profiles on dating apps are often relied upon to indicate what someone is after, so curating the right impression of what one is looking for becomes important (Albury & Byron, 2016; Blackwell et al., 2015). For example, having clothed pictures that show one’s face can often indicate someone being open to more social connections while more revealing pictures can hint at a desire for more sexual interactions (Blackwell et al., 2015). Intertwined with this are navigations of privacy and safety. For those who have not widely disclosed their queerness, being seen on an app for queer men can be risky, and they may choose to use faceless pictures (Albury & Byron, 2016; Blackwell et al., 2015). On the other hand, Hardy and Lindtner (2017) note that the “identity-based” nature of the apps means that, in some ways, they are safer spaces to express queerness because it is likely only other queer people will see them.

Although dating apps are often studied separately from other social platforms, people’s presentations on them can be linked to their accounts on other platforms (Byron et al., 2021; Wignall, 2017), highlighting a need to research how connections between different kinds of platforms can impact self-presentation.

2.6.4 Safety strategies

To protect themselves from negative experiences, many LGBTQ+ young people employ safety strategies when using dating apps (Albury & Byron, 2016; Byron & Albury, 2018). As Byron and Albury (2018) highlight, dating apps differ from other social platforms in that peoples' interactions are in private chats and not publicly visible, making it harder to set expectations or observe the safety strategies of others. As a result, they describe how many LGBTQ+ people develop their own "rules" when using dating apps.

Safety strategies could be employed when meeting people from dating apps, but also in managing online interactions Byron and Albury (2018). As we describe above ¹¹, dating app cultures, particularly on platforms such as Grindr, can be overly sexualised, and as Zytka et al. (2021) note, dating apps are often described in the literature as facilitating sexual violence both online and offline. To avoid such negative experiences, it is common for people to try to negotiate consent and make sure they were looking for the same thing as the other person before meeting (Dietzel, 2024). Similarly, some may look for people to follow the right etiquette when interacting, and avoid those who do not meet their expectations (Byron & Albury, 2018). In addition, fake profiles or "catfishes" are a common problem, and many develop strategies to try to spot or avoid them (Byron & Albury, 2018; Lauckner et al., 2019).

2.6.5 The need to include dating apps in social platform research

Dating and hookup apps are often left out of explorations of the way LGBTQ+ young people use social platforms (e.g., Carrasco and Kerne, 2018; DeVito et al., 2018b; Talbot et al., 2022). Instead, they have mostly received attention in research specifically focused on dating and hookup apps (e.g., Blackwell et al., 2015; Hardy and Lindtner, 2017; Jaspal, 2017). As discussed above ¹², prior work has emphasised the importance of recognising that people use a range of social platforms in concert with each other and discouraged studying single platforms (DeVito et al., 2018b; Zhao et al., 2016). However, as Byron et al. (2021) note, there is often a problematic separation made between dating apps and other social platforms – one that does not reflect the role they can play in the larger suite of social platforms LGBTQ+ young people use to find connections to community. Moreover, dating apps are often used in conjunction with other platforms. For example, many actively choose to link from their dating app profiles to their other social platform presences (Byron et al., 2021; Wignall, 2017). Given the importance of dating apps for queer young men, the wide ranging accounts of negative experiences related to mismatched expectations and issues of consent, and the way they are often excluded from broader work on social platforms, there is a need for more research on how they shape the experiences of

¹¹ See *Issues with how sexualised dating apps can be* (§ 2.6.2, p. 24).

¹² See *Impression management on social platforms* (§ 2.4.1, p. 17).

queer young men, and how their design might be improved.

2.7 Using social platforms in NSFW ways

Beyond dating apps, another aspect of social platform use that is often left out relates to the ways that they can be used for sexually explicit or Not Safe for Work (NSFW) interactions. Sharing sexual content often happens through sexting in private messages on dating apps or on other social platforms (Albury & Byron, 2016; Dietzel, 2024; Van Ouytsel & Dhoest, 2022). Studies have explored the sexting practices of LGBTQ+ young people, including the way that they navigate safety and risk (e.g., (Albury & Byron, 2016; Byron & Albury, 2018; Van Ouytsel & Dhoest, 2022)). Less explored, particularly within HCI, are the ways that social platforms are used for posting in socio-sexual spaces. As some in HCI have noted, the study of sex and sexuality has often been shied away from (Birnholtz et al., 2015; Kannabiran et al., 2011). As Kannabiran et al. (2011, p. 700) argue, “sexuality pervades many if not all aspects of human life, and understanding human life is ostensibly the very core of HCI, so the discursive marginalization of sexuality work in HCI seems hard to defend”.

Prior work has explored how people use social platforms in ways that blend social and sexual practices. Twitter’s various sub-communities where queer men can share and interact with sexual content, in particular, have received some attention from researchers (Cao, 2022; Dunn, 2023; Piamonte et al., 2020; Wignall, 2017; Zulier, 2021). Beyond this, however, much of the work relates to speciality sites (Paasonen et al., 2023), amateur (Dunn, 2023) or professional (Hamilton et al., 2023; Wang, 2021) porn performers, or within specific sexual subcultures (e.g the gay puppy scene) (Wignall, 2017). Additionally, work with queer men has explored unsolicited sexually explicit content being shared directly with people (e.g., Van Ouytsel and Dhoest, 2022) or on dating apps (e.g., Dietzel, 2024), but, little attention has been paid to issues of consent related to posting explicit content publicly. Similar to research around dating apps, much of the work that acknowledges how social platforms are used for sexual content and interactions is separate from explorations of how people use social platforms in other ways.

In the following sections, we describe prior work surrounding how social platforms are used to post NSFW content, highlight how NSFW communities can be sites of friendship and support, draw attention to issues of consent, and conclude by arguing that there is a need for more work that explores NSFW practices.

2.7.1 Posting NSFW content

As mentioned above, Twitter, in particular, as a place for queer men to engage in socio-sexual communities and practices has received some attention from researchers (Cao, 2022; Dunn, 2023; Piamonte et al., 2020; Wignall, 2017; Zulier, 2021). Communities to have received attention so far are (Spicy) Gay Twitter (Dunn, 2023;

Zulier, 2021) as well as ones more geographically situated or subculture based, such as Alter Twitter in the Philippines (Cao, 2022; Piamonte et al., 2020) and Pup Twitter (Wignall, 2017) in the UK. In explaining why Twitter has become the platform for these communities, the impact of US laws introduced in 2018 and governing the sharing of sexually explicit content has been cited (Dunn, 2023). While many platforms became more restrictive of users posting sexually explicit content, Twitter and Reddit continue to allow it (Blunt et al., 2021; Dunn, 2023; Hamilton et al., 2023).

Reasons for posting sexually explicit content often related to gaining attention, validation and social capital (Cao, 2022; Dunn, 2023; Piamonte et al., 2020). Similarly, work by Birnholtz (2018) has explored the way queer young men post shirtless selfies on Instagram, where sexually explicit content is not allowed, to gain validation and followers. As one of Dunn’s (2023, p. 18) participants expressed, “his Twitter profile was especially useful for him as a kind of tool with which he could validate his own body and sexuality, and consequently his greater sense of self, when he did not initially feel comfortable seeking out experiences in person”. Beyond this, some work explores the use of NSFW accounts to promote people’s pornography (Blunt et al., 2021; Cao, 2022; Dunn, 2023). To preserve privacy (Cao, 2022; Dunn, 2023; Wignall, 2017) or to avoid being perceived as “trashy” (Birnholtz, 2018), pseudonymous or private alt accounts are often used for this kind of content. However, some people had overlaps between their alt accounts and other social platform presences (Cao, 2022; Paasonen et al., 2023; Piamonte et al., 2020; Wignall, 2017).

2.7.2 NSFW communities as sites of friendship and social support

The places where people to post and interact with sexually explicit content can also become sites of friendship and social support (Cao, 2022; Dunn, 2023; Paasonen et al., 2023; Wignall, 2017). Often reported were the ways that queer men, among others, used their NSFW accounts on social platforms to seek social support or express happenings in their lives unrelated to sex (Cao, 2022; Dunn, 2023; Paasonen et al., 2023; Wignall, 2017). Prior work has explored how Tumblr was a place for sexually explicit content, exploration of LGBTQ+ identities and connection to peers, often in intertwined ways (Byron et al., 2019; Cho, 2018). However, the “death” of Tumblr following restrictions on NSFW content means that these communities have vanished or moved elsewhere (Byron, 2019; Duguay, 2018). Similar to the way Carrasco and Kerne (2018) talk about the “partial privilege” of being able to exist in queer spaces without having to be burdened with explaining one’s queerness, these places where sexual practices and expressions, beyond just one’s sexual orientation, can be shared without marginalisation allow for more authentic presentations (Cao, 2022; Paasonen et al., 2023). On the other hand, beauty standards within the queer community¹³ and the use of such places as

¹³ See *Racism and hegemonic masculinity* (§ 2.8.1, p. 29).

vehicles for validation or for sex work, through links to platforms such as OnlyFans, mean that there can be a pressure to present only highly curated content (Cao, 2022; Dunn, 2023).

2.7.3 Issues around consent

Receiving unsolicited explicit or “Not Safe for Work” (NSFW) content is a common consent issue (Dietzel, 2024). However, while work with queer men has explored unsolicited sexually explicit content being shared directly with people (e.g., Van Ouytsel and Dhoest, 2022) or on dating apps (e.g., Dietzel, 2024) as we discuss above ¹⁴, little attention has been paid to issues of consent where content is posted to one’s social platforms account using features that restrict audiences, for example, Instagram’s Close Friends.

In a broader context, Im et al. (2021) explore how affirmative consent could be applied as a theoretical framework for understanding social platforms and imagining new features. They define affirmative consent as “the idea that someone must ask for – and earn – enthusiastic approval before interacting with another person” Im et al., 2021, p. 1. They then apply this to social platforms through five concepts “which are derived from feminist, legal and HCI literature in the context of social platforms: affirmative consent is *voluntary, informed, revertible, specific, and unburdensome*” Im et al., 2021, p. 1. They then use these concepts to highlight ways social platforms fail to provide sufficient consent to users before using them to generate new ideas for design. While Im et al. (2021) explore issues of consent in user interactions, they also go beyond this, for example, arguing social platforms ought to provide users more agency over the visibility of content they share and the content they interact with.

2.7.4 The need for more work that investigates NSFW social platform practices

As we describe above, the ways that people use social platforms in NSFW ways has received little attention in HCI, especially when it comes to public posting of content and socio-sexual online communities. Although issues of consent have been explored on dating apps and in direct messaging (e.g., Albury and Byron, 2016; Dietzel, 2024; Van Ouytsel and Dhoest, 2022), such practices raise new issues around consent and call for further research. In addition to improving consent and reducing harm, the way that people use social platforms as part of sexuality ought to be better understood and not marginalised, as others have argued (Birnholtz et al., 2015; Kannabiran et al., 2011).

¹⁴ See *Issues with how sexualised dating apps can be* (§ 2.6.2, p. 24).

2.8 Lateral violence within the queer community

Although the connections to peers and others in the LGBTQ+ community afforded by social platforms can have a great positive impact, it can also open them up to harm in the form of lateral violence. In contrast to harms perpetuated by those outside of the LGBTQ+ community, lateral violence describes harms that are caused by others within the same community (Scheurman et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2022). Often, this is in the form of microaggressions, which Nadal et al. (2016, p. 1) define as “behaviors and statements, often unconscious or unintentional, that communicate hostile or derogatory messages, particularly to members of targeted social groups”. As they highlight, microaggression theory shares similarities with minority stress, which we discuss above ¹⁵, and the cumulative impact of microaggressions can similarly result in distress and other mental health issues (Nadal et al., 2016). This section starts by describing two foci of lateral violence and microaggressions in the queer community, racism and hegemonic masculinity. We then describe how this plays out on dating apps and the negative impacts of self-comparison.

2.8.1 Racism and hegemonic masculinity

Similar to experiences of heteronormativity being shaped by intersectionality ¹⁶, race and cultural background can also impact lateral violence. Indeed, much of the lateral violence described in the literature relates to racial microaggressions, for example where people are excluded from LGBTQ+ spaces, treated as second class citizens or targets of discrimination, on the basis of race (Nadal et al., 2016; Sadika et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2022).

As Tran et al. (2022) note in their scoping review of lateral violence and microaggressions in the LGBTQ+ community, racial microaggressions can also manifest as sexualisation or fetishisation based on racial stereotypes. For example, they describe that “gay Asian men in the Anglosphere are often stereotyped to have small penises, are bottoms, effeminate, and sexually submissive [and] are also occasionally stereotyped as docile and ‘not good in bed’” (Tran et al., 2022, p. 6). As they highlight, such stereotypes can lead to objectification, while also contributing to “dominant white beauty standards within the LGBTQ+ community” (Tran et al., 2022, p. 6).

For queer men, not conforming to dominant norms around masculinity and body image can also result in microaggressions and lateral violence (Breslow et al., 2020; Miller, 2018; Sadika et al., 2020). As prior work has found, many queer men aim to perform “the most valued type of masculinity” or “hegemonic masculinity” (Miller, 2018, p. 306). This often involves presenting as masculine, muscular, able-bodied, cisgender, and straight-acting (Breslow et al., 2020; Miller, 2018; Nadal et al., 2016;

¹⁵ See *Heteronormativity and minority stress* (§ 2.3, p. 14).

¹⁶ See *Intersectional experiences of heteronormativity* (§ 2.3.4, p. 15).

Tran et al., 2022).

2.8.2 Discrimination and microaggressions on dating apps

Hegemonic masculinity is often performed on dating apps where both profile text and images are used. For example, those pursuing hegemonic masculinity often use discriminatory or hateful language in their profile text, for example, describing that they are only looking for white masculine men and signalling to those who do not conform that they are not welcome (Birnholtz et al., 2014; Miller, 2018).

Exacerbating the issue, the designs of current dating apps are more image based compared to traditional dating websites, and there is pressure to present an attractive image to others (Birnholtz et al., 2014; Waling et al., 2023). At least for Grindr, its imaged-based design is intentional – the creator highlighted how he prioritises physical appearance as “one of the most important things” (Brubaker et al., 2016, p. 5). For queer men, the focus on physical attractiveness may also be compounded by differences, compared to heterosexual men, around self-presentation on dating apps. For example, (Waling et al., 2023) found heterosexual men thought that torso images needed to be shown in a context that provides a reason for them to be shirtless (e.g., a picture at the beach), whereas on queer apps such as Grindr, it is common for profile images to be completely focused on the body (Bonner-Thompson, 2017). Those who do not conform to hegemonic masculinity can also be the targets of direct harassment. For example, Filice et al. (2019) described how 9 of their 13 participants in a study of Grindr’s impact on body image were subjected to negative comments about their appearance and weight in their direct interactions with other users.

2.8.3 Self-comparison and mental health impacts

In addition to experiencing lateral violence from others, striving for hegemonic masculinity could also be internalised and lead to negative outcomes (Breslow et al., 2020; Filice et al., 2019). For example, the impact of self-objectification related to hegemonic masculinity has been linked to many negative effects, and is often linked to issues with body image satisfaction, abuse of steroids, and minority stress (Breslow et al., 2020). As Breslow et al. (2020) argue, issues of body surveillance and satisfaction often manifest differently in queer men, compared to other groups, for example, highlighting studies that found queer men reported higher levels of body surveillance and lower levels of satisfaction compared to heterosexual men. Similarly, research has shown that queer men are more likely to have disordered eating than their heterosexual counterparts (Filice et al., 2019).

Content that people see on social platforms such as Instagram can also have an impact on body image (Sumter et al., 2022). However, as Sumter et al. (2022) argue, much of the research is focused on participants who are women while there is much less that focuses on men. In an experiment with gay focused hashtags on

Instagram, Souza et al. (2025) found that images promoted by the platform’s algorithm were dominantly “white, hypermasculine, and targeted towards normative subcultures of the gay community”. Although some work in HCI has explored how queer young men present their bodies on social platforms (e.g., Birnholtz, 2018), the impacts on body image of seeing such idealised content has received less attention.

2.8.4 The need for more work exploring the impacts of lateral violence

As Tran et al. (2022) notes, there is an established body of research on harms perpetuated by those outside of the LGBTQ+ community however, there is a lack of academic work that acknowledges and explores lateral violence. As we describe above, social platforms used by queer men often preference hegemonic presentations of masculinity and discriminate against those who are not white, masculine, cisgender and able-bodied. Prior work has highlighted such issues, although little work has that investigates the impacts of hegemonic masculinity across a range of social platforms and many just focus on specific apps like Grindr (e.g., Birnholtz et al., 2014; Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Filice et al., 2019). Additionally, much of the work in HCI looks at how people present themselves (e.g., Birnholtz et al., 2014), or the content is algorithmically suggested (e.g., Souza et al., 2025), but little work has investigated how people experience seeing content that idealises hegemonic masculinity. Given the impact that self-comparison to idealised content can have on mental health (Breslow et al., 2020; Sumter et al., 2022), this is an important area for HCI to study.

2.9 Designing for queer and trans people

A growing body of work explores the experiences on social platforms of queer young men and LGBTQ+ people more broadly through qualitative methods. Work within HCI has often provided design considerations; for example, Carrasco and Kerne (2018) argue for features that afford users greater “selective visibility” over their social platform presences. However, few studies explore the implementation of such considerations in terms of design.

To date, there has been comparatively little work that uses design-led approaches to understand how to improve platform design for LGBTQ+ people, with some exceptions (e.g., DeVito et al., 2021b; Haimson et al., 2020; Hardy et al., 2022; Zytka and Furlo, 2023). While such work has generated valuable concepts and findings for design, the design approaches employed often stopped short of developing concepts and evaluating them with users. For example, as Hardy et al. (2022, p. 7) note, their use of participatory design workshops was “primarily a process of design inquiry”. A notable exception was work by Pereira and Baranauskas (2018), which used a series of co-design workshops with LGBTQ+ participants who developed and then evaluated social platform designs. Similarly,

while Im et al. (2021) generated many ideas for design through the application of affirmative consent to social platforms, it was beyond the scope of their work to evaluate the concepts they generated with users. To address this gap, there is a need to contribute more design-led work that explores how social platforms could be improved to better support the experiences of LGBTQ+ people.

2.10 Research questions

As the above review of the literature on LGBTQ+ people’s use of social platforms has shown, they can be a double-edged sword. While they can offer many positive experiences, they may also open queer and trans young people up to harm, whether through context collapse, lateral violence or a lack of appropriate consent affordances, to give some examples discussed above. Proposing ways that social platform design can be improved to better support the experiences of queer and trans young people is one way to address these issues. Indeed, as we have seen, prior work has often proposed design recommendations. However, as discussed in *Designing for queer and trans people* (§ 2.9, p. 31), there are limitations to the existing work that explores improving the design of social platforms. Furthermore, in order to contribute designs that support improving social platform experiences for queer and trans young people, it is crucial to have a solid understanding of their current experiences on social platforms. While there is a growing body of existing work that reports on their experiences, there are limitations to this work. As we found in our review of the literature, prior work often:

- Focuses on dating and disclosure although that is not a holistic view of how LGBTQ+ young people use social platforms.
- Focuses on specific platforms despite people using a range of platforms in combination with each other.
- Treats dating and hookup apps separately even though they are important sites of community and connection, and are often linked with people’s use of other platforms.
- Overlooks the NSFW ways that LGBTQ+ people use social platforms.
- Does not adequately consider how lateral violence and hegemonic masculinity shape queer young mens’ experiences on social platforms.
- Does not consider how the design of the social platforms use by participants could be improved.

The research questions are: ¹⁷

RQ 1 What role do social platforms play in shaping the experiences of queer young

¹⁷ Note that as discussed in *Focusing on queer young men* (§ 1.5.1, p. 5), the research scope was narrowed to focus solely on queer young men after the first study. As a result, the research questions initially read “queer young people” instead of “queer young men”, as they do now.

men?

RQ 2 How might social platforms be designed to be more supportive of the experiences of queer young men?

In answering the first question, we aim to extend understandings of how queer young men use social platforms in ways that address the limitations we have identified above. In answering the second, we will build on our findings in response to the first to explore new directions for social platform design that improve the experiences of queer young men. In the following chapter, we present the methodology taken to answer these research questions.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed literature around how queer young men use social platforms, critiquing prior work and introducing research questions to guide this thesis. In this chapter, we describe the methodology followed to answer these research questions. We start by describing how we decided on an approach to follow in this work, outlining considerations, which approaches we considered, and detailing our chosen approach, experience-centred design ¹. Following this, we provide an overview of the three studies we conducted as part of this work ². Subsequently, we discuss our relationship to the work and how this impacted it ³. We then describe the way we collected and analysed data across the three studies ⁴. Finally, we describe ethical considerations and procedures ⁵.

3.2 Approach

In this section, we describe the methodological approach we took in this work. We first lay out the case for taking an approach that centres experience, design and participation. We then describe three approaches we considered taking in this work, ethnography, user-centred design, and experience-centred design, the last of which we decided to adopt.

3.2.1 Centring experience, participation and design

To answer the research questions, it was important to follow an approach that centred experience, participation and design. Experience as RQ 1 concerns itself

¹ See *Approach* (§ 3.2, p. 34).

² See *Research studies* (§ 3.3, p. 41).

³ See *Positionality* (§ 3.4, p. 44).

⁴ See *Data collection and analysis* (§ 3.5, p. 45).

⁵ See *Ethical considerations and procedures* (§ 3.6, p. 47).

with exploring experiences of participants and so demands an approach that is sensitive to them. Participation as an important way to give voice to the community we are researching while also improving the quality of outcomes. Design in order to respond to RQ 2 which calls for design solutions. In the sections below, we argue for each of these factors in approach, starting with experience.

3.2.1.1 Experience

As McCarthy and Wright (2005, p. 265) argue, much work in HCI follows cognitive approaches which “typically address questions of efficiency and effectiveness”. However, to explore how social platforms shape the experiences of queer young men, and to be sensitive to the nuances of this group within the wider LGBTQ+ community, it is necessary to take an approach that centres participants’ experiences. Similarly, social platforms, by their very nature, are layered in the social fabric of our identity, our relationships, and the world in which we live, and this social context makes their use inherently emotional.

In describing their approach to centring “felt-life” and lived experiences, McCarthy and Wright (2005, p. 266) emphasise asking people to describe how they “felt about [an] experience, what it meant to them, whether it was important to them, and whether it sat comfortably with their other values and goals”. They argue that this approach enables researchers to unpack the emotional qualities of peoples’ relationships with technology, which prime them for their interactions and shape their goals and experiences.

McCarthy and Wright’s (2005) approach was later extended into Experience-Centred Design, the methodology followed in this work, and which is discussed in section 3.2.2.3.

3.2.1.2 Participation

Work with queer and trans people in HCI has often emphasised the importance of using participatory methods. They can give voice to people who have often been overlooked in design and, in doing so, support outcomes that are more aligned with the actual experiences and needs of those involved (DeVito et al., 2021b; Haimson et al., 2020; Hardy et al., 2022; Pereira & Baranauskas, 2018; Zytka & Furlo, 2023). As DeVito et al. (2021b, p. 2) describe:

“Due to the fact that [social platforms] are rarely designed *for* and even more rarely *with* LGBTQ+ people, [they] have an inadequate or incorrect understanding of the needs of this marginalized group.”

An important part of participatory approaches is that they decentre the researcher as the expert on peoples’ experiences and designing for them (Haimson et al., 2020; Wright & McCarthy, 2010). Instead, participants are actively involved in design. While being an insider in the community ⁶ has conferred benefits in terms of my

⁶ See *Positionality* (§ 3.4, p. 44).

understanding of the experiences of queer young men, it was important to do this work in a way that acknowledges a diversity of experiences beyond my own. Haimson (2023, p. 5) describes a similar sentiment in his work designing technology for trans people:

“Shared identity with the people who will be using a technology can be a great advantage – after all, the designer knows the trans experience intimately, and often feels like an expert in navigating the needs the technology is designed to address. On the other hand, no one trans designer (or small group of designers) can possibly embody or understand the full range of trans experiences that must be accounted for in design, especially when considering that many trans people hold multiple marginalized identities (e.g., trans people of color). Thus, it is still vital to include trans communities in design processes even when a designer themselves is trans or a design team includes trans people.”

Taking a participatory approach in this research is a way to involve queer young men in design work that seeks to improve their experiences on social platforms. In doing so, it can push back against universalist design that does not include their perspective and, at the same time, provide an opportunity for their voices to be heard.

3.2.1.3 Design

As we describe in *Designing for queer and trans people* (§ 2.9, p. 31), there is a limited amount of work exploring queer and trans people’s experiences with social platforms that uses design approaches. While the first research question focuses on the current experiences of participants, the second research question aims to address this gap by seeking answers as to how social platforms might “be designed to be more supportive of the experiences of queer young men”. As William Gaver (2012, p. 940) describes, “rather than making statements about *what is*, design is concerned with creating *what might be*”. As such, this research calls for an approach that is suited to design.

Research through Design (or RtD) is a common approach used in HCI “that employs the methods, practices, and processes of design practice with the intention of generating new knowledge” (John Zimmerman & Jodi Forlizzi, 2014, p. 167). Frayling (1993) coined the term “research through design” as part of a framework he created (John Zimmerman & Jodi Forlizzi, 2014). The framework describes three relations between research and design: research *into* design where the design process is the object of study, research *for* design where research guides design practice, and research *through* design where knowledge is generated through designing and making things (John Zimmerman & Jodi Forlizzi, 2014). As John Zimmerman and Jodi Forlizzi (2014) describe, RtD can look similar to design practice, but the emphasis is on creating new knowledge about situations and how to design for them, rather than (commercially) successful products (John Zimmerman & Jodi Forlizzi, 2014). As

they describe:

“RtD draws on design’s strength as a reflective practice of continually reinterpreting and reframing a problematic situation through a process of making and critiquing artefacts that function as proposed solutions” (John Zimmerman & Jodi Forlizzi, 2014, p. 167)

While there are multiple ways that RtD can be done, a common approach is as part of participatory design processes where people are involved in the design and evaluation of prototypes (John Zimmerman & Jodi Forlizzi, 2014). Above, we argue for the importance of taking a participatory approach that involves queer young men in the design work done as part of this research. Beyond simply drawing design considerations from ethnographic understandings of participants’ experiences, taking an RtD approach offers a way to involve them more directly – creating opportunities for them to interpret and frame their experiences through the creation and critique of designs for social platforms.

The designed artefacts that emerge from an RtD approach can also be valuable in communicating and elaborating on theory. As William Gaver (2012) argues, designed artefacts embed the choices made by their designers, often in ways that would be difficult to describe in a purely written form. In addition, through these embedded choices, they communicate the values of the designer, and their ideas about how to tackle issues (Carroll & Kellogg, 1989; William Gaver, 2012). Although previous work has often suggested design considerations for social platforms, going beyond this to produce, evaluate and share more concrete design artefacts may contribute to richer theory for future design (Gaver, 2011; William Gaver, 2012).

3.2.2 Approaches considered in this work

Above, we have provided a rationale for conducting this research in a way that centres experience, design and participation. It was important then to find a research approach that aligned with this orientation and could guide this work. In this section, we describe a number of approaches that we considered. We start by describing ethnography and user-centred design, two approaches we considered but did not take. We then describe our chosen approach, Experience-Centred Design, arguing why it was a better match for our research questions and the considerations we outlined above.

3.2.2.1 Ethnography

Dourish (2014) defines ethnography as “an approach to understanding cultural life that is founded not on witnessing but on participation, with the goal of understanding not simply what people are doing, but how they experience what they do”. Ethnography involves participant-observation, for one to observe peoples’ experiences within a cultural context and to learn about it through participation (Dourish, 2014). As Dourish (2014) note, ethnography takes a holistic approach,

observing not just individual tasks, but trying to make sense of experiences, and offer an account of them.

Although ethnography often utilises interviews to understand participants' perspectives on their experiences, observation is a key part of the approach. For example, boyd (2015), describes how she observes her participants' social media profiles, including the posts they make, and any online traces they generate. However, this relies on access to what participants are sharing and visibility into their interactions. Although this may work where participants are posting publicly on social platforms, many LGBTQ+ young people curate the audiences of their posts (Carrasco & Kerne, 2018; DeVito et al., 2018b; Hanckel et al., 2019) and so the full extent of how they share content is not likely to be visible. Although there may be ways to get participants to include us as part of their audiences, this is much more invasive than interviewing them about their experiences, especially given that we are also exploring how they use platforms in NSFW ways ⁷. Furthermore, such an approach would not work for dating apps where peoples' interactions (on most of the dating apps) happen in private messages and do not have an audience beyond this. This makes observation that would traditionally occur in ethnographic approaches difficult (Dourish, 2014).

Ethnography can be used as part of research *for* design, for example, offering empirical accounts of people's experiences that sensitise designers to them (Dourish, 2006; Wright & McCarthy, 2010). In addition, ethnographic approaches can offer conceptual contributions as well, for example, in the form of implications for design (Dourish, 2006). However, it is not an approach that accounts for research *through* design. As a result, it was unsuitable for answering the second research question through design. For this reason, and the challenges involved in observation we noted above, we decided not to do ethnography and instead sought an approach that could encompass both research questions.

3.2.2.2 User-Centred Design

A second approach we considered taking in this work was User-Centred Design (UCD). UCD is an approach that emphasises the importance of understanding users in order to design systems that are usable and meet their needs (Hernández-Ramírez, 2019; Wright & McCarthy, 2010) ⁸. It advocates for studying users, their behaviours and goals, and testing prototypes with them to make sure that they are usable and offer the desired user experience(s) (Hernández-Ramírez, 2019). Although UCD involves understanding users, this does not mean that it is participatory. UCD usually involves people early in the design process, for example, by conducting interviews, and as part of an iterative evaluation process, for example, usability testing of a prototype (Hernández-Ramírez, 2019; Velásquez et al., 2025). However, users are generally not involved as active participants in the design of the

⁷ See *Using social platforms in NSFW ways* (§ 2.7, p. 26).

⁸ Although the focus of Wright and McCarthy's (2010, p. 4) book is ECD, as part of describing its "roots" they provide an overview and critique of different approaches in HCI including UCD and participatory design, which is what we draw on when we reference it in this section.

system, as they would be in a participatory approach (Velásquez et al., 2025).

Beyond this, the focus of UCD on understanding users in order to design a system does not fit well in answering the research questions, as we will now argue. To answer the first research question, we need to produce a holistic account of participants' experiences on social platforms. However, the point of understanding users' experiences in UCD is primarily part of gathering requirements for design, not to provide such accounts or explore peoples' experiences holistically (Hernández-Ramírez, 2019; Wright & McCarthy, 2010). Similarly, the standard outcome of a UCD process, a design that is usable and offers the desired experience(s) (Hernández-Ramírez, 2019) does not match well to the second research question. In answering the second research question, the goal is not to design a new social platform for queer men, rather to describe ways in which the designs of social platforms used by participants might be improved. Moreover, while our design proposals must be practicable enough that they can be implemented in ways that are usable, testing the usability of a design in one context does not necessarily mean that other implementations will be similarly successful. While conducting usability tests may provide a way to gather data about a specific implementation in a restricted context, the results of such an endeavour are not necessarily able to be extrapolated beyond this (Olsen, 2007).

Given these mismatches between UCD and our research questions, we decided not to adopt it as our approach, and moved to Experience-Centred Design, which we describe in the following section.

3.2.2.3 Experience-Centred Design

Experience-Centred Design is an approach described by Wright and McCarthy (2010) that emphasises the importance of focusing on people's experiences. As a design approach, it focuses on outcomes that are used to inspire design or where design is used as part of the research process, for example, where participants interact with or are involved in the creation of prototypes. In describing their approach, Wright and McCarthy (2010) contrast it with previous approaches that focus on gathering requirements and testing usability without trying to understand people's lived experiences. As they write, ECD is "an approach to design that is centred on engagement with people's values, emotions, and perspectives, with people's experience and the sense they make of it" (Wright & McCarthy, 2010, p. 27). Although ECD can often involve ethnographic methods, for example, conducting interviews or observing people to understand their experiences, its outcomes and process are often design-oriented (Wright & McCarthy, 2010).

ECD also has a moral orientation that values the experiences of people and how technology can be used to enrich them over technical innovation. For example, Wright and McCarthy (2010) describe that while the appeal in design work can often be on new computing technologies, the drive behind ECD is to:

"give people the chance to have a richer life, to include people who might

otherwise feel excluded, and to ensure that everybody has a chance to have their say, especially those who often feel voiceless” (Wright & McCarthy, 2010, p. 2)

In describing their “humanist agenda” for ECD, they draw on the traditions of Scandinavian Participatory Design. Central to this is the involvement of people who stand to benefit (or suffer) from the outcome of the design process (Wright & McCarthy, 2010). Furthermore, Wright and McCarthy (2010, p. 9) underscore the importance of conducting ECD in a way that impacts “people’s lived experience in ways that are socially, politically, and personally meaningful”.

As Wright and McCarthy (2010) describe, dialogue is a core part of ECD and provides the means to understand peoples’ experiences, as well as to involve them in design. In ECD, dialogue, often in the form of storytelling, is the way for people to share their perspective, make sense of their experiences and for the researcher to develop a shared understanding with them. As they argue, neither observation nor surveys can provide deep enough insights into peoples’ experiences, but rather that this is achieved through dialogue and the shared empathy it can foster.

In support of dialogue, Wright and McCarthy (2010) espouse the importance of listening to participants in ways that are open to their experiences and stories. They describe the importance of going into interactions with participants with few preconceptions, as if wanting to be taught about their experiences. The process is not merely asking participants for a passive recounting of experiences, they describe “listening to a person’s story and, in dialogue with them, creating new meaning” (Wright & McCarthy, 2010, p. 55). In this way, a participant’s engagement is not just transferring knowledge of events but perhaps creating new shared meanings about their experiences.

ECD does not prescribe particular methods or “forms of engagement” (Wright & McCarthy, 2010, p. 69) – the emphasis instead is on using methods that are dialogical and centred on experience. They encourage creative, evocative or reflective methods, for example, citing cultural probes as a method which requires creative engagement from participants in ways that can disrupt the natural instinct to respond to questions with a preformulated script based on past retellings of experiences. They also note the importance of having an open dialogue with people before the work of designing anything beings. As they describe:

“The designer is involved in dialogue with the participants, each person trying to understand the other’s point of view, and their needs and desires, and trying to understand how best to contribute something to the growing mutual understanding of the current situation and possible futures. The designer and the user are both changing the situation (as a form of inquiry) in order to learn from it and understand how to go on.” (Wright & McCarthy, 2010, p. 69)

Throughout their descriptions of ECD, Wright and McCarthy (2010) emphasise the

importance of seeing the researcher not as a passive observer but rather as an active participant in dialogue and making meaning. As they describe, “understanding experience requires involvement, not just observation, and that designers bring their own ways of seeing, values, sensibilities, and interests to the design process” (Wright & McCarthy, 2010, p. 23). Later they caution that “trying to understand other people, including users, by foregoing one’s own perspective may reproduce existing knowledge but will not produce new understandings” (Wright & McCarthy, 2010, p. 57). This view of the researcher being an active participant continues into analysis. They note, for example, that describing the process of “extracting” findings from data can be misleading through an assumption that it is a passive process devoid of “creative or imaginative intervention” from the researcher (Wright & McCarthy, 2010, p. 66) ⁹.

Wright and McCarthy (2010) adapt Frayling’s (1993) framework for the types of research through design to describe three main ways to use ECD, research *for* experience-centred design, research *through* experience-centred design and research *into* or *about* experience-centred design. Research *for* describes using the approach to understand the experiences of people in order to later design something for them. Research *through* describes involving people in an experience-centred design process whereby they are involved in participatory or co-design processes, perhaps interacting with prototypes. The third way, research *into* or *about*, focuses on understanding the methodological practice of ECD. In this research, we use both research *for* and *through* experience-centred design.

While the two approaches we described above, ethnography and user-centred design, did not match well to answering both of our research questions, ECD offered an approach that is more suitable. Its focus on understanding experience and using ethnographic methods allowed us to answer the first research question, providing a holistic account of participants’ experiences using social platforms. In addition, its ability to be used in research through design combined with its focus on creating dialogue and meaning with participants, instead of on requirements gathering and usability, allowed us to answer the second research question through design explorations with participants.

3.3 Research studies

To address the research questions, we took an Experience-Centred Design approach involving three studies. Following the ECD approach, the aim of each study was to engage participants in dialogue about their use and perceptions of social platforms. Study 1 and Study 2 used semi-structured interviews and probes to create dialogue about participants’ current experiences with social platforms. Study 3 then used Research through Design to create dialogue with and between participants about new social platform features. In this section, we provide an overview of each study.

⁹ See *Positionality* (§ 3.4, p. 44) for further discussion of our positionality in relation to this work and *Reflexive thematic analysis* (§ 3.5.2, p. 46) for an overview of the approach we took to analysis.

S#	Methods	RQ addressed	Chapter
1	Semi-structured interviews (9 participants)	RQ1 What role do social platforms play in shaping the experiences of queer young people?	<i>Chapter 4: Study 1</i>
2	Semi-structured interviews and probes (24 participants)	RQ1 What role do social platforms play in shaping the experiences of queer young men?	<i>Chapter 5: Study 2</i>
3	Co-design workshops (13 participants) and evaluation sessions (15 participants)	RQ2 How might social platforms be designed to be more supportive of the experiences of queer young men?	<i>Chapter 7: Study 3</i>

Table 3.1: Overview of studies

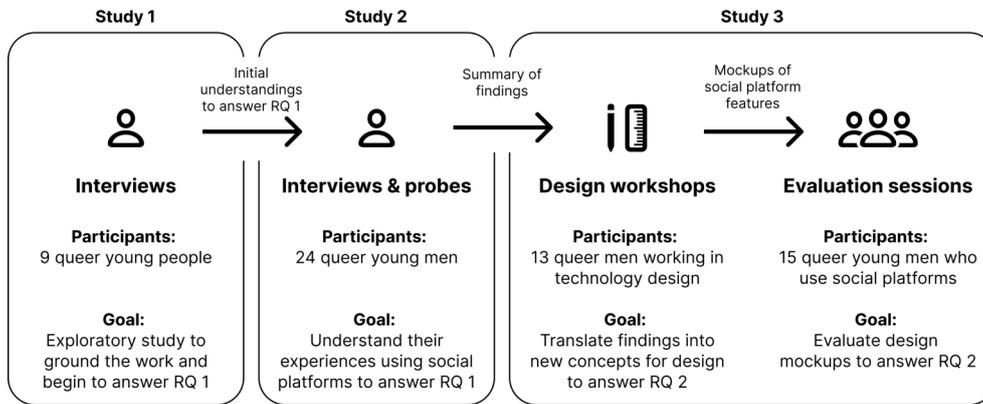


Figure 3.1: An overview of the studies and methods used in this research.

Table 3.1 provides an overview of the studies, methods and a link to the relevant chapter where each study is described in depth. See also Figure 3.1 for a visual overview of each study and how they are related.

The three studies progressively built upon each other, using the findings from the previous study to provide grounding and framing. Study 1 focused on the first research question and served as a grounding for the research, identifying directions for further exploration in Study 2 and resulting in refining the demographic being researched¹⁰. Study 2 involved a more in-depth exploration of the experiences of queer young men on social platforms. Study 3 then took findings from Study 2 to ground design explorations that sought to answer the second research question.

3.3.1 Study 1: An interview study to ground the research

This initial study aimed to explore the lived experiences of a range of queer people through semi-structured interviews to provide an empirical grounding for a more

¹⁰ See *Focusing on queer young men* (§ 1.5.1, p. 5) for more detail about this change.

in-depth second study. It focused on addressing the first research question, exploring the ways in which participants' social platform usage has shaped and continues to shape their experiences. We recruited and interviewed nine participants across a range of queer and trans identities.

The main findings from this study are themes that relate to participants' journeys from self-discovery and acceptance, to living in the closet, coming out and life beyond. Collectively, they reveal participants' lived experiences of queerness and the different ways they were shaped by social platforms.

See *Chapter 4: Study 1* for more information about this study.

3.3.2 Study 2: An interview and probe study to investigate current experiences on social platforms

Building on the initial explorations in Study One, in the second study, we conducted more in-depth semi-structured interviews with twenty-four new participants. This study continued to focus on the first research question, this time focusing solely on (queer young) men, to understand how social platforms shaped participants' experiences. Between the two interviews, we gave participants a custom-designed probe kit consisting of five different probe activities. Using probes allowed for insights into their experiences beyond the confines of an interview by allowing them opportunities to reflect on their use in creative ways.

The findings from this study are six themes which describe participants experiences: *Engaging with LGBTQ+ content*, *Curating disclosure*, *Wrestling with the pressure to conform to the image of an ideal queer man*, *Curating an attractive image*, *Sharing less idealised presentations*, and *Finding and interacting with peers*.

See *Chapter 5: Study 2* for more information about this study.

3.3.3 Study 3: A research through design study to explore new design directions

While the first two studies addressed the first research question, this third study focused on the second. It used understandings of how social platforms shape the experiences of queer young men from Study 2 to ground design explorations of how social platforms might be designed to be more supportive of their experiences.

Similar to the work of others (e.g., Derix et al. (2022)), we conducted this work in two phases, first recruiting professionals working in technology design to generate concepts, then evaluating them with users following a concept-driven or design workbook approach (Gaver, 2011; Stolterman & Wiberg, 2010). In the first phase, we conducted design workshops with participants working in technology design in

the San Francisco Bay Area to generate concepts for social platform features, presenting findings from a previous study to act as inspiration for design. In the second phase, we refined these concepts into a series of design mockups and presented them in a series of evaluation sessions in Sydney.

The design concepts that we mocked up after the co-design workshops focused on blocking unwanted messages, aligning expectations, helping people use dating apps, improving agency over what one sees and shares, finding connection to community and decreasing self-comparison. We then used participants' responses to these mockups in the subsequent evaluation sessions to generate findings related to how social platform design could be improved to better support the experiences of queer young men.

See *Chapter 7: Study 3* for more information about this study.

3.4 Positionality

I, the author, am a queer young man, like many participants involved in this research, and have first-hand experience of much of what they described. Throughout this research, I have, in consultation with my doctoral supervisors, devised the studies, recruited participants and facilitated their involvement, analysed collected data and written this thesis as well as the papers resulting from this work.

My personal experience as an insider within the community I was researching enabled me to build rapport with participants. It was also beneficial, at various points, in allowing me to read between the lines of what participants were saying or to understand their shorthand. As I describe in the preface ¹¹, my experiences motivated this work, and as a result have shaped the way that I approached it, for example, my choice to explore the ways that social platforms help queer young people to discover who they are, find community and express themselves. While my own experiences and insider status have been helpful, I have also taken great care not to assume that participants have had the same experiences as me and to do justice to their unique situations and experiences. For example, as a white cisgender man, I do not have experiences of racism or transphobia that many participants who were People of Colour or trans described, however, I did my best to faithfully present and acknowledge such participants' experiences. As Haimson (2023) describes in the quote above ¹², even if one is an insider in the group, one cannot possibly possess the entire range of experiences to be accounted for in design. Nevertheless, it is impossible to remove the researcher from the research, especially in qualitative work such as this, and it is important to acknowledge my position in relation to the work.

I am very grateful for how open participants were about their use of social platforms and suspect that being a visibly queer man of similar age likely made them feel more comfortable sharing their experiences. On the other hand, it is possible that some

¹¹ See *Preface* (p. vi).

¹² See *Participation* (§ 3.2.1.2, p. 35).

participants may have omitted details or curated what they shared with me due to being part of the same community. As Wright and McCarthy (2010) describe:

“When we want to share an experience with someone else, we have to put our experiences into words and actions, and we put those words into circulation for others to make sense of and evaluate according to their own values. Stories can never catch the totality of our lived experience; they are always edited versions. What we leave out and what we put in is a matter of choice, and we often make such editorial decisions on the basis of who we are telling the story to. When we share experiences with others we are disclosing something to the other about ourselves, and that may make us vulnerable. How people respond to our story may change the value and meaning of that story and may ultimately impact on how we think about ourselves, and whether that story becomes something we are proud of, want to own, and want to tell again” (Wright & McCarthy, 2010, p. 20)

My doctoral supervisors have contributed to the research design and reporting of this research. They did not have any contact with participants. Professor van den Hoven is a white Dutch cisgender woman and Professor Buckingham Shum is a half-Chinese half-British cisgender man. Neither identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, nor had previously been involved in research specifically targeting participants from it. However, both described having strong senses of social justice, advocating against discrimination of any kind and priding themselves on being open-minded. As a result, they were interested in learning about participants experiences and supporting work that could have a positive impact on the community. Professor Leong (who was initially my primary supervisor) is a cisgender gay man, which meant that, similar to the author, he could relate to some of the experiences participants described. He notes that this could have led to assumptions about the participants’ experiences or the research direction but that he did his best to remain as guided and led by literature and participants’ data as possible.

3.5 Data collection and analysis

Throughout each study, we collected data as part of our engagement with participants. In this section, we describe data collection, analysis using reflexive thematic analysis, and our use of Atlas.ti to conduct analysis.

3.5.1 Data collection

In all three studies, we collected audio recordings of each interview, workshop or session. We transcribed the audio recordings for the first two studies using Otter.ai¹³, an online AI transcription service. For the third study, we used

¹³ Otter.ai, Inc. 2024. Otter.ai. <https://otter.ai>

MacWhisper¹⁴, a graphical client that used an offline version of OpenAI’s Whisper transcription model. In all cases, we used the programs to create an initial transcription of the recordings. We then listened to the recordings and manually corrected the transcripts that had been automatically generated. This correction step was necessary as the initial transcripts often had errors, especially when participants used slang. However, letting an AI model do the first pass and then manually refining it was much faster than doing the whole transcription by hand. The second pass also allowed us an opportunity to familiarise ourselves with data before we later started coding it, an important step in the reflexive analysis process we followed¹⁵. Importantly, this second pass also allowed us to anonymise the transcripts by removing or redacting identifying information¹⁶.

Studies 2 and 3 also included the collection of data from artefacts created by participants. For example, probe returns in the former and worksheets in the latter¹⁷. These were analysed alongside the audio recordings as part of the reflexive thematic analysis process.

3.5.2 Reflexive thematic analysis

Following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), we used Reflexive Thematic Analysis to analyse the data collected during the three studies and develop themes. As Braun and Clarke (2021) note, thematic analysis is often perceived as a single method where, in fact, there are multiple approaches, each with its own procedure and epistemological foundation. Reflexive thematic analysis involves six phases that act as guidelines for analytic engagement and are often conducted in non-linear or recursive ways, supporting reflexivity and continued engagement with the data (Joy et al., 2023). The six phases are: familiarising yourself with the dataset; coding; generating initial themes; developing and reviewing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Joy et al., 2023). The reflexive thematic analysis approach Braun and Clarke (2021, p334) describe emphasises researcher subjectivity and interpretation of the data as a “resource for knowledge”. They advocate for reflexivity and interrogation of epistemological assumptions and argue attempts to demonstrate “coding reliability and the avoidance of ‘bias’ [are] illogical, incoherent and ultimately meaningless” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p334).

We chose to follow the reflexive thematic analysis approach described by Braun and Clarke (2021) as it fits well with ECD. In both, the researcher is seen as an active participant in creating meaning in dialogue with participants and not a passive observer who tries to extract findings from data (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Wright & McCarthy, 2010). Furthermore, we take an experiential orientation (Byrne, 2022) as this work focuses on exploring participants’ felt experiences with social platforms.

¹⁴ Jordi Bruin. 2024. MacWhisper. <https://goodsnooze.gumroad.com/l/macwhisper>

¹⁵ See *Reflexive thematic analysis* (§ 3.5.2, p. 46) for more detail about analysis.

¹⁶ See *Privacy and confidentiality* (§ 3.6.2.2, p. 49).

¹⁷ See the Method section for each study for details about the artefacts we used and collected, *Method* (§ 5.2, p. 63) and *Method* (§ 7.2, p. 192), respectively.

We coded data in an inductive and iterative way that described the semantic meaning communicated by participants and the latent meaning we interpreted from what they described. This reflects the epistemological approach taken in this work following ECD, which values the researcher’s subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Wright & McCarthy, 2010). For more detail on the analysis undertaken in each study, see the relevant section in each study chapter ¹⁸.

3.5.3 Tool use: Atlas.ti

To assist with reflexive thematic analysis, we employed Atlas.ti ¹⁹, a computer program designed for conducting qualitative analyses. By loading the interview transcripts, as well as the posters from the evaluation sessions ²⁰, we were able to easily code the data (see Figure 3.2 for a screenshot of the coding interface). After we had conducted initial coding, we used Atlas.ti’s Code Manager function (see Figure 3.3) to group codes into folders and use these groups to develop initial themes.

Using analysis software was critical for handling the amount of data and number of codes and resulting themes. For illustrative purposes, the transcripts of interviews from Study 2 were over 400,000 words long, and we created over 1,200 codes throughout the analysis. This organisation also proved invaluable when writing up each theme as it made it trivial to move between different layers of data, for example, to see exactly which codes were part of a particular theme or to find instances of particular codes and directly view what participants had said.

While Atlas.ti does offer AI-based features that aim to automate qualitative analysis, we did not employ these at any point. As noted above, the researcher’s subjectivity plays a valuable role in the reflexive thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and using such automated tools would have undermined our ability to connect with the data.

3.6 Ethical considerations and procedures

Given the involvement of participants in this research and the potential for them to discuss sensitive or private topics in relation to their sexuality, gender and use of social platforms, it was important to conduct this research following ethical guidelines. Throughout this work, we sought and received ethical approval to conduct each study under the University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). For Study 1, we used Professor Leong’s program approval from the HREC (UTS HREC approval number: ETH17-1811). As part of this, he conducted an ethical review of the research design in his role as supervisor and approved it. For later studies, we sought and were granted independent own ethical approvals from

¹⁸ See *Method* (§ 4.2, p. 53), *Reflexive Thematic Analysis* (§ 5.2.5, p. 76), and *Reflexive Thematic Analysis* (§ 7.2.2.4, p. 196).

¹⁹ ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH. 2024. ATLAS.ti. <https://atlasti.com>

²⁰ See *Evaluation sessions* (§ 7.2.2, p. 194).

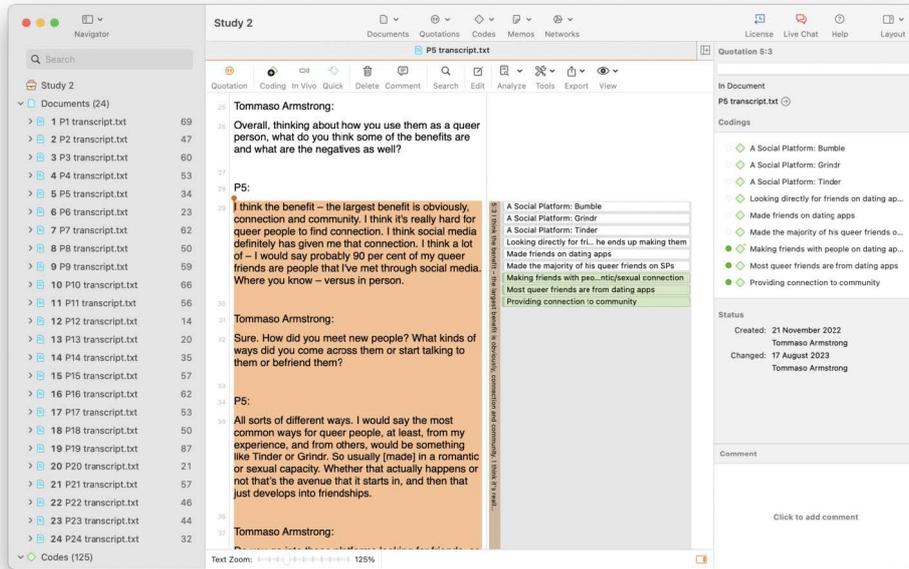


Figure 3.2: A screenshot of the Atlas.ti interface that shows how a section of P5’s transcript from Study 2 has been coded.

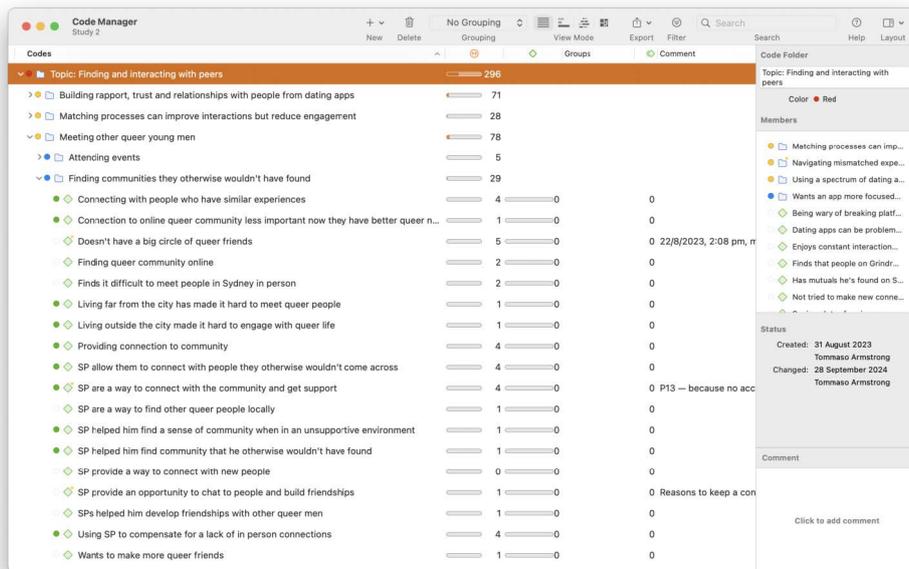


Figure 3.3: A screenshot of the Atlas.ti code manager that shows an example of how codes have been organised.

the HREC specific to this work (Study 2 UTS HREC approval number: ETH21-5761, Study 3 UTS HREC approval number: ETH23-7971).

3.6.1 Consent

All participants involved in this research gave informed consent to be involved. They were provided with Participant Information Sheets following the university template that described involvement, provided information about risks, described how their data would be used and guidance for what to do if they had any concerns about their involvement. Before commencing interviews or sessions, we walked participants through the Participant Information Sheet explaining each section and answering any questions that participants had. All participants of in-person interviews, workshops and evaluation sessions signed a consent form, while all those who did Zoom interviews provided verbal consent following a university-provided script ²¹.

3.6.2 Risk considerations

Involvement in this research presented three main risks to participants. We now describe these risks and the steps that we took to mitigate them.

3.6.2.1 Distress

The first risk was of distress during direct involvement. The interviews in Studies 1 and 2 involved questions that may have been of a sensitive nature (e.g., asking about negative experiences on social platforms, experiences of disclosing queerness online and interactions with other people on social platforms) and there was a risk that participants may feel distressed answering these questions. During the group sessions as part of Study 3, participants may have become distressed or had a disagreement with another participant.

To mitigate the risk of distress we employed a number of strategies. We created a distress protocol to be used if we became aware that a participant was distressed ²². As part of going through the Participant Information Sheet at the beginning of interviews or group sessions, we explained that participants did not have to answer questions or participate in activities if they did not feel comfortable. We encouraged them to let us know if they wanted to skip questions, take a break or finish their involvement early. Finally, we provided contact details for counselling services in case participants wanted to seek professional help after their involvement.

3.6.2.2 Privacy and confidentiality

Participants in Study 1 and 2 were asked to share their experiences of being queer and using social platforms. Similarly, while participants in Study 3 were not

²¹ See the appendices for the Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms used in each study. *Study 1*: Appendix A.1: *Information and consent documents* (p. 288), *Study 2*: Appendix B.1: *Information and consent documents* (p. 292), and *Study 3*: Appendix C.1.1: *Information and consent documents* (p. 299) and Appendix C.2.1: *Information and consent documents* (p. 311).

²² See Appendix C.3: *Distress protocol* (p. 320).

required to share their personal experiences, it was possible that they would as part of the research through design process and their involvement was an indication of their queerness. Queerness can be a very personal and sensitive topic, and harm can result in its disclosure for some participants. Additionally, their experiences using social platforms may have been personal or embarrassing in nature if participants were to be identified. Recording, storing and using data of a sensitive nature always has accompanying privacy risks which need to be managed.

To protect participants privacy and confidentiality, all use of dating in this research was in an anonymised form where we had removed identifying details and used a participant number instead of names. The files linking participant numbers to their names and contact details were password protected. Research data was stored securely and not accessible to anyone other than me.

3.6.2.3 COVID

While Study 1 was conducted in 2019, Study 2 and 3 were conducted after the emergence of COVID. As part of conducting research with participants, there was a mandated COVID plan which we created and adhered to as required to reduce the risk of COVID transmission. Participants in Study 2 were also given the option of being interviewed over Zoom.

3.7 Chapter 3 Conclusion

In this chapter, we described our methodology for the thesis. We started by laying out a case for centring experience, participation and design in selecting an approach to take. We described ethnography and user-centred design, describing their relevance for consideration, but ultimately arguing their unsuitability. We then described our chosen approach, Experience-Centred Design, detailing how it addressed our criteria and was a better match for our research questions. Following this, we described the three research studies we conducted as part of this thesis, and how they corresponded to our two research questions. We then discussed our positionality in relation to the work, highlighting the author as an insider in the community we studied, and how this shaped his engagement with participants, as well as commenting on the relations of his supervisors to the work. Subsequently, we described how we collected and analysed data across our three studies. In the final section, we described ethical considerations we took, and procedures we followed, as part of the work, including how we sought consent from participants and considered various risks of their involvement. In the following part, we move to answering the first research question, starting with Chapter 4 which describes our first study.

Part II

Investigating current social platform experiences

Chapter 4

Study 1: Using interviews to ground the research

This chapter extends a previously published paper that detailed this study, Armstrong and Leong (2019) ¹.

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we present the first of two studies we conducted to investigate the first research question by exploring participants' experiences on social platforms. As we found in our literature review, heteronormativity and minority stress shape LGBTQ+ young peoples' experiences in complex ways, creating additional pressures compared to their cisgender heterosexual peers ², and for many motivating the concealment of their identities ³. As prior work has found, social platforms are vital for queer and trans young people, helping them learn about their identities and connect to peers ⁴. Dating and hookup apps are often linked to other social platform experiences, and a place where LGBTQ+ young people may find peers, however, often not considered in prior work, as some have argued ⁵. Furthermore, while lateral violence has been described previously, some have argued that it has not received enough attention.

To ground the subsequent research through design work to answer RQ 2, which we describe in *Part III*, we designed our first two studies to investigate RQ 1. In the process, we build on and extend prior work describing how social platforms shape the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people. The study we describe in this chapter was designed to be exploratory and to provide initial findings that could motivate

¹ See *SNS and the Lived Experiences of Queer Youth (Armstrong & Leong, 2019)* (§ D.1, p. 322) for a full versions of this paper.

² See *Heteronormativity and minority stress* (§ 2.3, p. 14).

³ See *Curating disclosure of identity* (§ 2.4, p. 16).

⁴ See *Learning about and engaging in the queer community* (§ 2.5, p. 20).

⁵ See *Using dating and hookup apps* (§ 2.6, p. 23).

the more in-depth second study. As a result, this study was much smaller than *Study 2*, having 9 participants compared to 24 in the latter. Following this, our description of this study is also more brief compared to the more substantial *Chapter 5: Study 2*, which provides more in-depth findings about social platform experiences. Further, as we describe in the introduction ⁶, the demographic involved in the research narrowed from LGBTQ+ young people to queer young men after this study. As a result, the research question this study was designed to answer was:

RQ 1 What role do social platforms play in shaping the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people?

We start this chapter by detailing the method we took as part of this study, before then describing the findings we made through our analysis. As our findings show, social platform use was entwined with participants' journeys of self-discovery, exploration of identity and finding of community, as well as how they chose to conceal or disclose their identities to others.

4.2 Method

In this section, we describe the method we took in conducting this study. We start by detail participant recruitment and then move to describing how we conducted semi-structured interviews.

4.2.1 Participant recruitment

We used social platform posts to recruit prospective participants for the study. Using the author's status as an insider in the community being studied, he shared the posts on his Facebook and Twitter accounts, asking those within his network to re-share them. He also contacted Queer Collectives at local universities who agreed to share them with their members.

We directed prospective participants to register their interest using a screening survey. The survey provided more information about the research in the preamble and allowed us to collect information about participants that would help us decide whether to include them or not, as well as their contact details. To include a range of demographics and experiences, the screening survey asked prospective participants to self-describe their age, cultural background and identification with the target group for the research. Following Carrasco and Kerne (2018), we allowed participants to self-describe how they identified with the target demographic and their cultural background. Unfortunately, the survey was the target of homophobic harassment in the form of fake responses with offensive language.

After selecting participants to be involved, we then contacted them to thank them for registering, to provide further information, and to arrange the interview. This included a document following the standard university human research template,

⁶ See *Focusing on queer young men* (§ 1.5.1, p. 5).

Table 4.1: Participant details

P #	Age	Pronouns	Queer Identity	Cultural background
1	22	they/them	Bisexual & transgender	Irish & Aboriginal Australian
2	23	he/him	Gay	Jewish
3	26	he/they	Gay	Filipino
4	18	they/them	Bisexual, possibly non-binary trans	Filipinx Japanese
5	19	she/her	Bisexual/queer	White Australian
6	24	he/him	Gay	White Australian
7	28	he/him	Gay	British
8	25	she/her	Queer, bisexual, pan-sexual	White Australian
9	18	he/him	Transgender	British & Australian

which outlined involvement, risks and how their data would be treated. Prior to the interview, participants signed a consent form ⁷. A summary of participants is presented in Table 4.1.

4.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

The exploratory nature of this study meant that we chose to use semi-structured interviews to learn about participants' experiences. Topics of the interview included participants' LGBTQ+ identities and journeys of discovery, their cultural and religious backgrounds, familial and social relationships, and their use of social platforms and attitudes towards them. The author conducted the interviews and used his queerness to position himself as an insider to build rapport with participants and make them feel comfortable ⁸. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the author. Subsequently, we analysed the transcripts using Reflexive Thematic Analysis following Braun and Clarke (2021) and developed 6 themes, which are described in the next section ⁹.

4.3 Findings

The following section presents a subset of themes that emerged in the analysis of the interview data. Collectively, they reveal lived experiences of being LGBTQ+ and the different ways technology shapes queer and trans experiences. The themes are presented in an order that reflects the chronology of participants' journeys from self-discovery and acceptance, to living in the closet, coming out and life beyond. While they follow a typical journey based on the experiences our participants shared, we note that these stages may overlap, be experienced in a different order, or not at all.

⁷ See *Information and consent documents* (§ A.1, p. 288).

⁸ See *Positionality* (§ 3.4, p. 44) for a detailed description of the author's positionality in relation to the work.

⁹ See *Data collection and analysis* (§ 3.5, p. 45) for more details.

4.3.1 Technologies for self-discovery

All participants had a moment of realisation that they were queer or trans. This was either by realising that not everyone had the same non-heteronormative feelings or attractions as them, or, by making sense of, and accepting, feelings or attractions they had that were not normative. For example, P4 described:

“I was watching Aladdin [when I was 6], and there’s like the bit where like Jasmine’s in the hourglass, and I was like, niceeeee... I thought everybody was bisexual. I thought everybody was attracted to men and women, but only like got in relationships with people of the opposite sex, because like I knew that had something to do with babies... So I didn’t realise that wasn’t normal till I was like 10.” [P4]

Online spaces provided a place where participants could explore, or even discover these identities, often with the safety afforded by being able to visit these communities privately and anonymously. This avenue for exploration was particularly important where participants did not have access to existing access to queer role models. The most commonly mentioned platform for this was Tumblr, where participants found LGBTQ+ communities with whom they could engage. For example, P1 shared:

“[Figuring out my] gender mostly it was like, through Tumblr and stuff and like, reading about other people’s experiences and going like, ‘Oh, actually, that sounds like me’, and then kind of connecting with communities of trans people. And then yeah, identifying in that way.” [P1]

However, participants used a range of social platforms. P4 and P9 were both members of a Facebook group aimed at queer school-aged kids in their state. However, due to the privacy settings of the group, they had to be invited by existing members they had disclosed their identities to. P6, at the age of 17, found an online forum for gay teens while browsing the internet, becoming an active member of the community, and eventually a moderator. He spoke of how valuable it was to learn from his peers on that site and how the ability to express his queerness openly, gave him the confidence to come out.

“I learned so much about being gay well before I came out from this website, from these teenagers on the site. You know, half of them weren’t out who [and were] asking all the same questions I had, half of them [who had come out] were answering all these questions. It was like a really great peer resource.” [P6]

In addition to social platforms, participants also used online resources for exploration and learning. These resources were particularly useful surrounding topics they would not otherwise have been exposed to, for example, sexual health education, LGBTQ+ relationships, and queer and trans history. For example, P7

learned about local queer history online and felt a greater sense of belonging with the community.

4.3.2 Life in the online closet

All participants underwent a period where they had realised that they were queer or trans, but felt unready, reluctant or even unsafe to disclose their identities. This period was talked about by most participants as a quite difficult time that involved feeling unable to express themselves and living double lives, especially when interacting with their families. For some, who were brought up in conservative environments, it made it very difficult to explore who they were. For example, P3 described:

“I realised that [I was gay] when I was 11... probably because I had a crush on a football player. He was a centerfold for women’s magazine... So I grew up in a very conservative Catholic family. So [being gay] was not a thing that I was able to accept until much, much later. And I came out when I was 18, towards the end of high school. And then yeah kind of explored really the guts of what it meant to be me from then on, a little bit later than most people.” [P3]

Participants described going to great lengths to hide their identities from family, both in the ways that they used technology and in the physical world. Multiple spoke of how they refrained from liking content or RSVPing to events on Facebook in case the digital traces these actions would cause were seen by those to whom they had not disclosed their identities. For example, P4 talked about how their online self is not their true self out of safety concerns. In the physical world, participants spoke about trying to appear straight, hiding friendships with visibly queer people from their families and not going to major queer events in case their parents correlated the dates. For example, P4 described how they felt meeting from the LGBTQ+ Facebook group they were part of:

“There is that aspect of like, it’s almost you feel like a secret spy like living a double life? It’s like, Mum, I’m going to the movies with my high school friends. Don’t worry about it.” [P4]

Although many concealed their identities, often using social platform affordances to hide being queer or trans from unsupportive audiences, some eventually decided to use their accounts to disclose their identities, as we describe in the following theme.

4.3.3 Coming out through technology

Many of the participants disclosed their identities progressively and strategically, often starting with friends with whom they were closest, or who were most likely to be accepting. Sometimes this was done through an explicit conversation, message or Facebook post, but participants often described making more subtle hints or less direct announcements of their queerness. For example, P4 shared:

“It’s not like I texted people being like: ‘Hi, I’m bi now’. It was definitely just times like, ‘oh I’ve started dating girls...’ Or, like, ‘this person’s really hot’. Like, that’s kind of how I come out in a way.” [P4]

Often the reaction to participants disclosing being queer or trans was overwhelmingly positive despite the fear that preceded it. However, some participants did describe negative experiences. Social platforms could also provide a way to disclose being LGBTQ+ to a wider audience. For example, P6 after telling those close to him and his family, used Facebook to broadcast his queerness. He saw it as a way to get the process of coming out over with quickly, and to avoid the stress of having to keep a mental log of who he had told. Similarly, P9 disclosed that he was trans to close people, and used social platforms to share his identity with everyone else to make it easier for himself. While he did not make a “coming out post”, he was able to assert his identity by changing his name, as he described:

“I’d realized I was trans in December then had the whole like term one [of high school] to kind of come out to the close people and think about who I was and whatever. And then in the holidays, I changed my name on Facebook and Instagram and on social media, which was really useful because it meant that I didn’t have to like, tell even more people, because at the time, it was really traumatic to say to say the word “trans”, to say, “I am trans”, like, I struggled with that so much when I was coming out to people I was close to. I just like couldn’t say the word, it would take me like 20 minutes of just being like “soooooo...”. Social media, in that sense was really was really useful for me changing my name and that kind of thing.” [P9]

As many participants found, however, disclosing their identities could be a continual process, as we describe in the following theme.

4.3.4 Technology and encounters with heteronormativity

Many participants still felt the burden of actively managing their self-expression in certain situations despite having disclosed their identities to friends and family. In unfamiliar contexts, especially professional ones, participants spoke of being cautious about being perceived as LGBTQ+ until they were sure they would be safe. For example, P6 spoke about not revealing he was gay at a new job until he saw that a visibly queer colleague was treated well. Similarly, P4 described using Facebook to vet potential friends or acquaintances. If someone’s profile contained anti-queer or alt-right sentiments, they will refuse to befriend them out of safety concerns. On the other hand, some participants tried to be upfront with their identities to avoid interacting with those who would not be supportive. For example, P5 shared:

“I think I very much start straight away with my sexual identity in the queer community [when meeting people online]. Because if someone

disagrees with that, or isn't accepting, they're someone I either want to educate, or if they show no signs of willing to learn or change, it's not someone I'm wanting to spend time with, because that will be worse for my mental health and how I feel about myself and my identity." [P5]

For P9, the inability to restrict the privacy of specific posts on Instagram combined with the social pressure to accept follow requests from his colleagues has been particularly troubling. He did not want to delete the posts he made pre-transition that would expose him as trans, nor did he want his colleagues to see them. The result was a stressful situation that he did not know how to escape.

Many felt the continual burden of having to explain their identity or actions to people are cisgender and heterosexual, especially where their queer identity was more complex than merely being gay. Most participants had circles of friends who were predominantly LGBTQ+, and many ascribed the emotional labour of having to explain themselves to people who are not queer or trans as a significant reason for this. Multiple participants used different labels to simplify their identity when talking to cisgender heterosexual people as they felt this would ease their interactions and result in fewer questions. For P1 this meant conforming to presenting themselves in a trans-masculine way amongst those to whom they had previously disclosed their identity as being a trans man to, despite having a fluid gender identity that often did not reflect their earlier declaration. P5 and P9 preferred to refer to themselves broadly as being "queer", however often identified themselves as bisexual. In addition, participants who were attracted to more than one gender described continually having to remind people they were queer when they were in "straight" relationships. For example, P4 shared:

"Coming out isn't just like one experience. It's just, it's constant. And when you're with your straight friends, and you have to remind them, especially as a bisexual person, "Yes, I've dated men. But I have also not done that... I've also dated women", it's just not having to explain yourself as just takes all that emotional labour off." [P4]

4.3.5 Meeting people using dating apps

Some participants were drawn to dating apps seeking connection to others that went beyond finding romantic or sexual partners. Experiences varied considerably across different apps in terms of how positive they were. Tinder was touted as being much more civil and dating-centric compared to Grindr. Participants saw the latter as both toxic and much more sexualised. However, despite the various negative experiences they described having on Grindr, they continued to be drawn to the app in the hopes of finding positive experiences.

The five participants who had used Grindr described a plethora of negative experiences on it. These ranged from receiving abusive or unsolicited explicit messages to seeing profiles that had racist or otherwise discriminatory lists of

unattractive characteristics. They detailed a culture that idolises people who look a certain way and ignores or actively rejects those who do not conform. For example, P6 shared:

“[There is] a lot of you know disrespect towards you know, members of the community who are who are less normal, less heteronormative, you know, we’ve all seen ‘masc4masc’ or ‘no femmes’ on a dating app profile. And I mean, the impact that has on people’s self-esteem... to put on like a public advertisement, ‘if you are this, then fuck off!’ If someone’s not your type just don’t reply, or say ‘Sorry, [I’m] not interested’. You don’t have to tell them preemptively. ‘Hey, before you even consider it, fuck off loser.’” [P6]

Both P6 and P7 explained how they see the culture on Grindr as self-reinforcing. They described how new users to the app are initially submitted to this toxic culture and eventually become bitter enough to perpetuate it themselves. For example, P7 described:

“[Grindr is an app where] there’s a lot of judgement on... you have to be very thick skinned. And I used to use the line a lot from Batman, which is you either die here or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain... I hoped that I could be better than everyone else on Grindr... but when you’re faced with that same exact behaviour when you try and make conversation with someone who looks nice, yeah, not even for a hookup, but maybe just like make a friend, and you just hit brick walls, like nine out of 10 times, you start getting bitter. And you start you start behaving poorly towards other people.” [P7]

Some participants blamed the anonymity afforded by the platform for dehumanising profiles and allowing people not to be held accountable for their actions. In contrast, participants found Tinder to be a friendlier space. Whereas on Grindr anyone can start a conversation, on Tinder both parties need to have “liked” the other. Participants credited this difference for significantly reducing the number of abusive messages they received, and making them feel more confident in their interactions. As P1 described:

“[When messaging someone on Tinder] you both matched with each other and showed at least like a very basic interest in like getting to know each other. And so I think there is that kind of yeah, it feels like a more comfortable place to start talking to someone because like, you know, at least on like a very basic level, they’re kind of interested in talking to you” [P1]

While Grindr does not require disclosure of gender when creating a profile, Tinder does. This is because Tinder relies on people to report their gender and the gender(s) of those they want to see to determine the profiles they are shown. In doing this, it assumes a gender binary which proves problematic for P1 who is

non-binary. To overcome this limitation, P1 alternates the gender that they report. They also change the gender of those they want to see to match to ensure that they are only shown to other queer people.

4.3.6 Seeking queer spaces

The constant requirement to explain themselves to those who were not queer or trans drove most participants to have mainly LGBTQ+ friends, but also to seek out safe physical and virtual spaces where they felt more comfortable being themselves and could let their guard down. When talking about queer-friendly physical spaces, dedicated “Queer Spaces” on university campuses and queer bars or clubs were the most frequently mentioned by our participants. In the virtual realm, participants spoke mainly of their experiences within Facebook groups and on dating apps. In some cases, physical and virtual spaces could overlap. For example, P4 talked about the peer support they get from the Discord server their university’s queer space has:

“The Queer Collective’s Discord group chats are so good. It just has everything I need, like it has the ‘memes’ channel, it has the ‘sad advice’ channel, it has the ‘I need to vent about my parents’ channel. Just it’s so good.” [P4]

While these spaces provided an opportunity to escape heteronormativity, navigating these spaces could often present additional challenges to participants. For example, while P4 spoke of how queer spaces allow them to express themselves freely, others spoke of cultures of exclusion and harassment that often plagued these spaces. For example, P5 shared:

“There’s very much a, for lack of better term, a gay-triarchy. In that a lot of a lot of cis-gender and white queer people who either identify as lesbian or gay, sort of run a lot of the things or are the majority in the collective.” [P5]

Many of our participants expressed a desire for more inclusive and less sexualised queer spaces. For example, mentioning that they wanted places to hang out other than clubs, and online places to find friendship instead of dating apps.

4.4 Chapter 4 Conclusion

This first study used semi-structured interviews with 9 LGBTQ+ young people between the ages of 18 and 28 to explore their uses of social platforms. We found that many of our participants followed a similar journey from realising they were LGBTQ+, learning about their identities, disclosing their identities (whether to trusted friends or more broadly), navigating heteronormativity, and seeking spaces where they could find peers. Throughout these stages, we explored how social platforms shaped participants experiences, finding that they could offer support, but also open them up to harm. For example, platforms were helpful for self-discovery

and finding peers, however, lateral violence was common on dating apps.

In the following chapter, we build on our findings from this study to motivate a second and more in-depth study of social platform experiences.

Chapter 5

Study 2: Using interviews and probes to investigate current social platform experiences

5.1 Introduction

As part of *Study 1*, we conducted an initial exploration of how a range of LGBTQ+ young people use social platforms. We found that many participants shared common journeys and used social platforms to develop their identities and connections to others in the community. Consistent with prior work, we found that social platforms were important for participants to learn about and develop their LGBTQ+ identities ¹. Similarly, we also saw how social platforms could expose participants to harm through homophobia and transphobia ², and additionally through lateral violence, which is less acknowledged in prior work ³. Alongside this, we found a greater need for agency over self-presentation on social platforms, similar to prior work ⁴, and a desire for more platforms that support building friendships. This first study aimed to recruit participants from all groups in the LGBTQ+ community. However, while surfacing similarities between subgroups within the LGBTQ+ community, it became clear that there are also differences in the social platforms that are used and nuances in their experiences.

In this second study, we built on the understandings developed in the first by using semi-structured interviews and a custom-designed probe kit to investigate experiences using social platforms at a deeper level. As part of this, we decided to focus on the experiences of queer young men in particular ⁵. Based on our findings

¹ See *Learning about and engaging in the queer community* (§ 2.5, p. 20).

² See *Heteronormativity and minority stress* (§ 2.3, p. 14).

³ See *Lateral violence within the queer community* (§ 2.8, p. 29).

⁴ See *Designing to improve curatorial affordances* (§ 2.4.4, p. 20).

⁵ See *Focusing on queer young men* (§ 1.5.1, p. 5) for a more detailed explanation of this decision.

from *Study 1* and our literature review, we also identified a number of areas that warranted further exploration in this second study. These included exploring the impacts of lateral violence in more depth, including how hegemonic masculinity shaped experiences ⁶, how social platforms could be used to assert identity ⁷, and the ways that platforms are used in NSFW ways ⁸.

This chapter consists of two main sections that describe the study and its findings. In the first, we describe the method that we took to conduct this study, while in the second, we describe our findings.

5.2 Method

In this section, we describe the method we took to conduct this study. We start by describing our creation of a probe kit that we used to help our investigation into participants' experiences on social platforms. We then describe how we conducted the study, from piloting it and recruiting participants to how we engaged with participants and our subsequent analysis.

5.2.1 Using probes

Experience-Centred Design encourages practitioners to create dialogue with participants. However, as Wright and McCarthy (2010) caution, simply asking people to tell you about their experiences can result in them recounting scripted or stereotypical accounts of themselves that mask the complexities or nuances of their realities. For this reason, Wright and McCarthy (2010) suggest going beyond standard interviews by using creative or evocative methods to help participants reflect on, share and build a shared understanding of their experiences alongside researchers. They highlight probes as a method well-suited to this as they “require the person to creatively construct imaginative responses, rather than simply report on factual evidence” (Wright & McCarthy, 2010, p. 65). Following this, we use a custom-designed kit of probes as part of this study, as we describe in this section. We start by describing the origins of probes as a method in section 5.2.1.1 before describing how we designed the kit in section 5.2.1.2.

5.2.1.1 Probes as a method

Probes were initially developed by Gaver et al. (1999) as a way to seek inspiration for design by giving participants a kit of what they named *cultural probes* – activities designed to give glimpses into the communities they were designing for (Boehner et al., 2007; Gaver et al., 1999). Participants completed the probes, and designers interpreted them for inspiration (Gaver et al., 1999). Since then, others have adapted the method to interpret probes with participants, often as part of interviews (Boehner et al., 2007; Çerçi et al., 2021; Mattelmäki et al., 2016). In

⁶ See *Racism and hegemonic masculinity* (§ 2.8.1, p. 29).

⁷ See *Coming out through technology* (§ 4.3.3, p. 56).

⁸ See *Using social platforms in NSFW ways* (§ 2.7, p. 26).

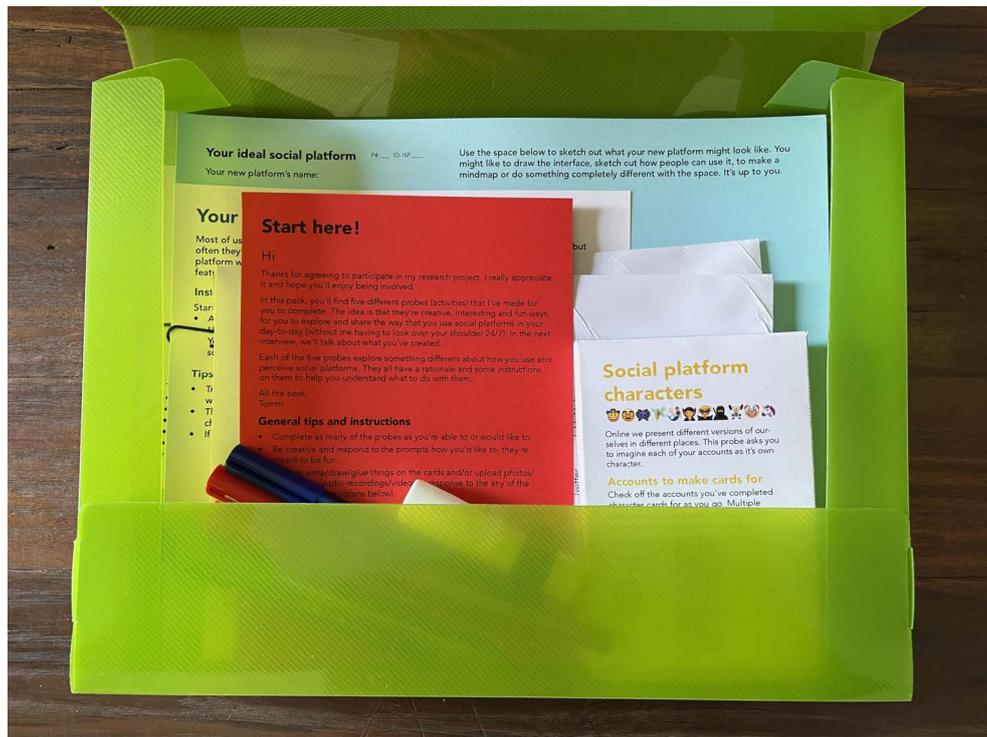


Figure 5.1: The probe kit given to participants

doing so, probes become dialogical tools which offer “a way of soliciting further reflection [by] providing a situated *ticket to talk*” (Chatting et al., 2017, p. 435). The co-interpretive nature of using probes in this way can also foster empathy with participants and support the researcher in developing a shared understanding of their experiences (Boehner et al., 2007; Çerçi et al., 2021; Mattelmäki et al., 2016).

While many have used the original (cultural) probes developed by Gaver et al. (1999), some have emphasised the importance of probes being designed artefacts situated within the specific context of the research (Boehner et al., 2007; Mattelmäki et al., 2016; Wallace et al., 2013).

5.2.1.2 Designing a custom probe kit

As part of this study, we designed a custom kit of five probes to allow participants to reflect on their experiences with, and perceptions of, social platforms (see Figure 5.1). Using probes allowed for insights into participants’ experiences beyond the confines of an interview by allowing them opportunities to reflect on their use in creative ways. This was particularly important as directly observing participants’ use of social platforms presents both privacy and practical challenges. In the case of the former, people’s use of social platforms can be deeply personal and surveilling participants’ interactions would be an undue invasion of privacy. On a practical level, people use social platforms at all hours of the day and in varied contexts, many of which participants would be unlikely to welcome a researcher into. Conversely, using probes provides a non-invasive way for participants to reflect on

Start here!

Hi _____,

Thanks for agreeing to participate in my research project, I really appreciate it and hope you'll enjoy being involved.

In this pack, you'll find five different probes (activities) that I've made for you to complete. The idea is that they're creative, interesting and fun ways for you to explore and share the way that you use social platforms in your day-to-day (without me having to look over your shoulder 24/7). In the next interview, we'll talk about what you've created.

Each of the five probes explore something different about how you use and perceive social platforms. They all have a rationale and some instructions on them to help you understand what to do with them.

All the best,
Tomm

General tips and instructions

- Complete as many of the probes as you're able to or would like to.
- Be creative and respond to the prompts how you'd like to, they're meant to be fun.
- You can write/draw/glue things on the cards and/or upload photos/screenshots/audio-recordings/videos in response to the any of the probes (see instructions below).

Uploading content using the dropbox

1. Scan the QR code to open your private dropbox. (I recommend you install the OneDrive app if you haven't already because it'll make it easier)
2. Upload the file you've created
3. Name the file with the ID of the probe card/sheet so that it can be matched up later (e.g. SPC1.png).



If you have any questions or need help

Feel free to text, call or email me. My number is <redacted> and my email is Tommaso.Armstrong@student.uts.edu.au

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Figure 5.2: The welcome sheet included as part of the probe kit to orient participants.

and share their experiences using social platforms. In addition, getting participants to use probes to document how they used and perceived each social platform they used reduced the need to ask repetitive questions for each platform.

Similar to Wallace et al. (2013, p. 343), each probe “related to different facets of what we thought might be significant, as informed by theory and our own experiences”. Following Derix and Leong (2019), we designed the probes to range in their openness or boundedness, pace and challenge. This provided participants with simple activities that could serve as icebreakers and activities that encouraged deeper reflection (Derix & Leong, 2019; Wallace et al., 2013).

The probes were packaged in a translucent coloured plastic folder that also contained a welcome card and stationery that could be used to complete them (see Figure 5.1). The welcome card was included to guide participants to use the kit (see Figure 5.2). It starts by thanking them for being involved and reintroducing the purpose of the kit. It then includes general tips and instructions for using the kit and the author’s contact details in case they had questions or needed help. The folder also contains coloured pens, a glue-stick and coloured stickers intended to be used with *Probe 3: A Day of Social Platforms*.

While the kit and individual probes would be explained to participants before being handed over ⁹, we included details about each probe activity, including step-by-step

⁹ See *Participant involvement* (§ 5.2.4, p. 73) for a description of how the probes were used with participants.

instructions, so that they would not have to rely on their memory.

To support flexibility in how participants could respond to the probes, we created a digital dropbox where they could upload screenshots or other files. To facilitate this, each welcome card has a unique QR code that linked to a OneDrive folder specific to that participant.

Each probe activity was printed on differently coloured cardboard sheets to distinguish them, and the accent colour of the instructions along with each probe was matched to this. Each probe card has a place to write in a participant number and a unique ID. To reduce the amount of paper that had to be used while giving participants ample cards so that they did not run out, we only added participant numbers to completed cards when they were returned. This way, unused probe cards could be given to other participants. The ID for each probe card starts with an acronym of the probe title, which is printed on the card and is followed by a space for us to write a handwritten number before handover. To help us match any dropbox uploads to the probe cards, we provide instructions on naming the files they uploaded using the ID on each probe card.

In the following sections, we describe the design of each of the five probes.

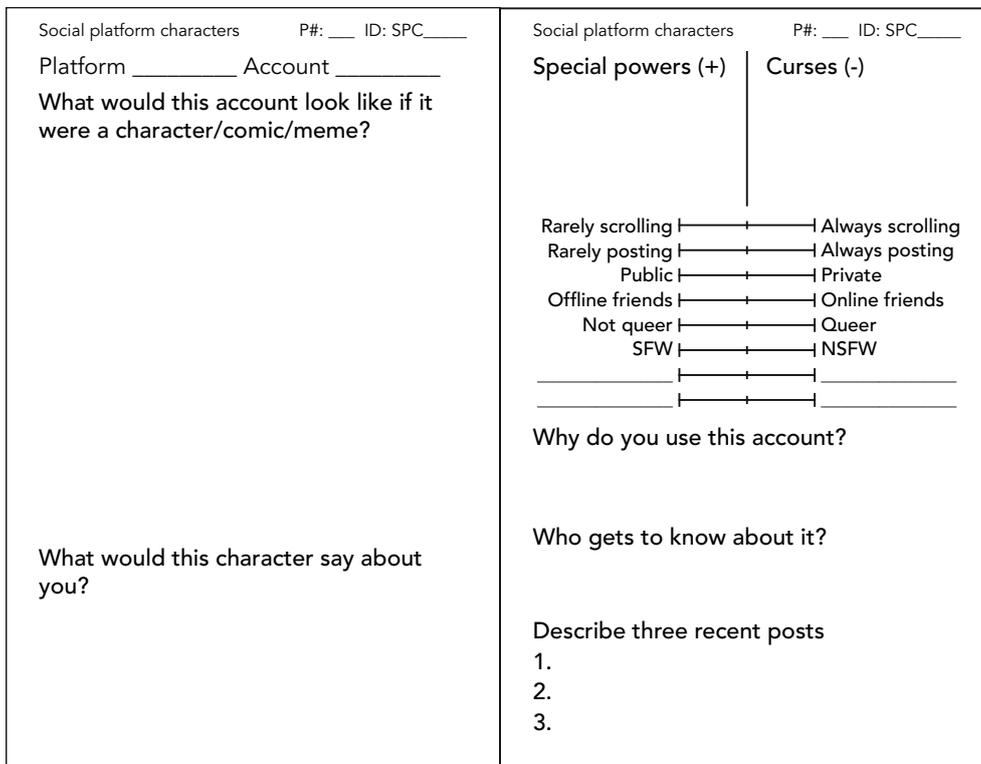


Figure 5.3: The front and back design of the *Probe 1: Social Platform Characters* cards.

5.2.1.2.1 Probe 1: Social Platform Characters People present different versions of themselves across the social platform accounts they use. For example,

they may curate the way they disclose being queer or trans ¹⁰ or how they appear on dating apps ¹¹. This probe uses the metaphor of character cards to get participants to showcase the way they present on each of their accounts. Figure 5.3 shows the design of the probe cards for reference.

The front of each card is designed to personify the account, encouraging participants to draw a character, comic or meme that caricatures their use of it. It also includes a prompt that asks participants what the character they have drawn would say about them, inviting reflections on their use and how it might be perceived. At the top there is a space to write in the platform the card is about and a label for the account. This label is to make sure that that if participants have multiple accounts on a single platform, they can be differentiated. The instructions note that participants can use labels such as “main”, “alt” or “personal” so that they do not have to reveal the usernames of their accounts.

The back of the card provides a way for participants to briefly detail their perceptions of the account and how they use it. The metaphor continues here, borrowing from the design of character cards which often provide details about figures by listing their abilities or including visualisations of their attributes. It starts with a prompt to describe the “special powers” and “curses” of the account before providing scales where participants can indicate where it falls in terms of various attributes, including two blank scales they can self-define. Participants are then prompted to share their reasons for using the account, its audience, and a description of three recent posts.

The cards were designed to be slightly larger than standard playing cards to make it easier to draw and write on them but not too big to break the metaphor. The back of the card was intentionally designed to be quick to complete, even if participants found the idea of drawing a caricature of the account on the front challenging. While the front gave participants a space to be playful or creative in the representation of the account, the prompts on the back were more straightforward. In addition, the limited spaces to respond based on the size of the card only afforded brief responses and the scales were quick to fill out.

The cards were packaged in a cardboard box that resembles a box of cards (see Figure 5.4). The front of the box shows the title of the probe and provides a brief introduction to the activity. It also provides instructions around “accounts to make cards for” that prompts participants to make cards for each of their accounts on the social platforms they use. Check-boxes are provided so that participants can check off each account, and there are multiple for each platform recognising that participants may have alt-accounts. The back of the box has step-by-step instructions for how to complete the probe cards.

5.2.1.2.2 Probe 2: Moments Worth Screenshotting While we chose not to directly observe participant’s use of social platforms, we wanted a way to capture

¹⁰ See *Curating disclosure of identity* (§ 2.4, p. 16).

¹¹ See *Curating presentation on dating apps* (§ 2.6.3, p. 24).

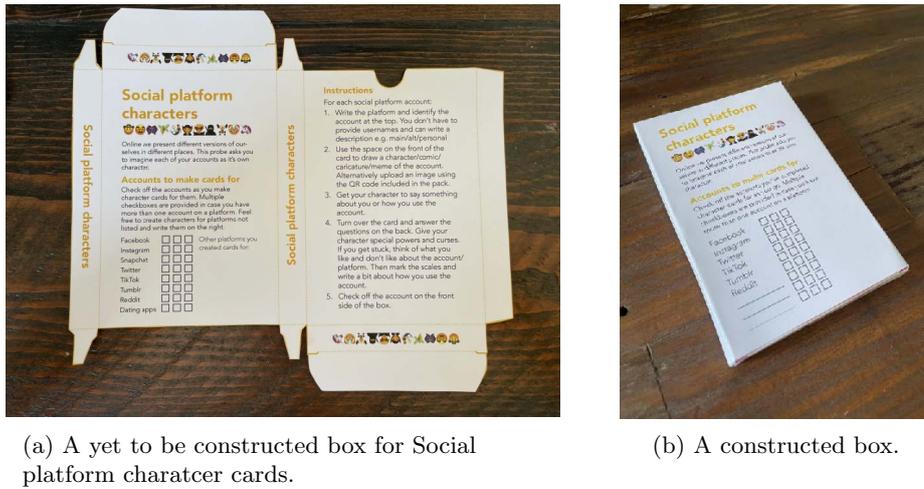


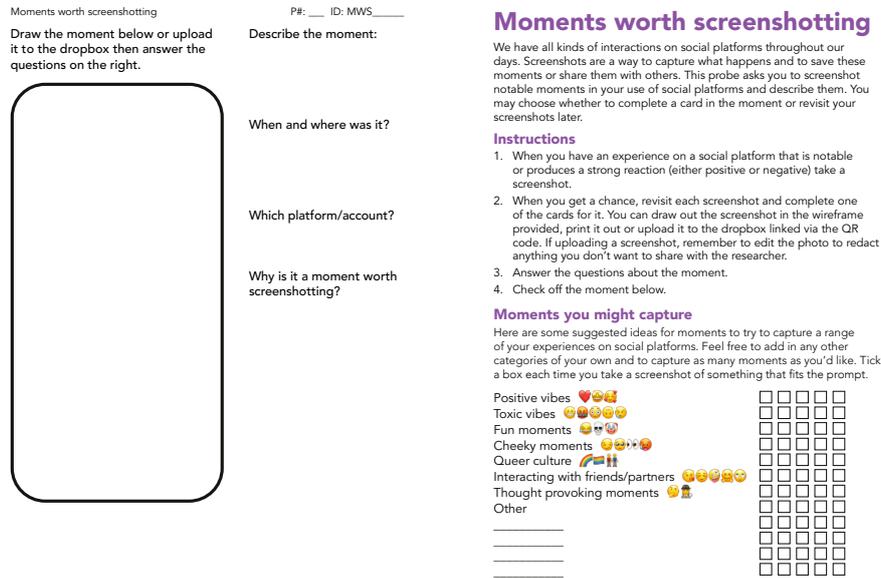
Figure 5.4: The box for *Probe 1: Social Platform Characters*.

affective or interesting interactions that they had. This probe provided a way for participants to capture “moments worth screenshotting” that occurred while they had the probe kit and share them with us. Figure 5.5 shows the design of the probe cards and the instructions for reference.

The cards for this probe were A5 to fit a fully-sized frame for a phone that participants could draw in. Next to the frame are a series of questions which prompt participants to describe the moment and why they chose to capture it. As it was expected that the moments participants shared might be personal or private, we designed the probe so participants could draw out screenshots, giving them agency to share in a way and level of detail that they were comfortable with. Like the other probes, participants could also choose to use the dropbox to upload screenshots if they preferred. Most participants either uploaded screenshots for all of their “moments worth screenshotting” or drew all of them. However, one participant uploaded screenshots for all but one moment, one where he shared a thirst trap on his Snapchat story. Drawing out the thirst trap instead of uploading a screenshot of it, he was able to share this moment and discuss it in the interview without having to share a risqué photo of himself.

The A5 cards were packaged in an envelope with instructions printed on the front. Similar to other probes in the kit, the instructions included prompts for “moments you might capture” and check-boxes to indicate responses to them. By including prompts, participants were encouraged to capture and describe a range of different types of moments.

5.2.1.2.3 Probe 3: A Day of Social Platforms This probe was designed to contextualise the way participants used social platforms from a more zoomed-out perspective compared to the first two probes. It does this across two dimensions, first by capturing interactions with multiple platforms and second by focusing at the



(a) The design of the Moments Worth Screenshotting card.

(b) The instructions printed on the envelope containing the probe cards.

Figure 5.5: The probe card design and instructions for *Probe 2: Moments Worth Screenshotting*.

level of a day. As people use a variety of social platforms together ¹², it was important to design a probe that allows participants to provide a window into how they use different platforms throughout the day. Figure 5.6 shows the design of the probe cards for reference.

The probe card was an A4 sheet with a blank timeline that participants could annotate with their social platform use. We decided not to put times on the timeline as we expected that participants' routines could vary, and this would allow them to decide on a scale that suited them best.

The probes cards came with an A5 instruction sheet held to them with a paper clip (see Figure 5.7). Similar to the other probes, the instruction sheet introduces the probe, provides instructions on how to complete it and offers probes for things to include when completing it. The instructions suggest using the coloured dot stickers included in the kit or to use symbols to represent their use of social platforms and the card itself has a space to create a legend that explains how they did this. Knowing that a single day may not be representative of participants' general use of social platforms, the instructions encourage participants to record multiple days.

5.2.1.2.4 Probe 4: Honest Platform Ads While the first three probes focus on how participants use social platforms (at an account level, at specific moments, and throughout a day, respectively), this probe provides a way to reflect on perceptions of the platform as a whole. It does so by instructing participants to

¹² See section *Curating disclosure of identity* (§ 2.4, p. 16).

A day of social platforms

P#: ___ ID: DSP _____

Date: _____

Legend: _____

Figure 5.6: The design of sheets for *Probe 3: A Day of Social Platforms*.

create “honest” ads that reveal the realities of using them through satire. The idea behind the probe is that satire is a powerful and creative tool for communicating critical perceptions and unspoken realities. While participants were told they could highlight both positive and negative aspects of platforms, the ads they created were almost exclusively critical. Figure 5.8 shows the design of the probe cards and the instructions for reference.

The probe cards are A5 and feature a wireframe of an Instagram ad that participants can complete. We chose this format as we expected participants to be familiar with Instagram ads and it bounded the detail of responses they could create. Like *Probe 2: Moments Worth Screenshotting*, the cards are packaged in an envelope with instructions and prompts printed on the front-side.

5.2.1.2.5 Probe 5: Your Ideal Social Platform The final probe offers participants a speculative opportunity to imagine their ideal social platform. While this study focuses on participants current experiences, this probe serves as another way to uncover their perceptions of the social platforms they use. The idea is that by describing what an ideal social platform looks like to them, the positives and negatives they see with existing platforms are implicitly surfaced and can be discussed. Figure 5.9 shows the design of the probe cards for reference.

Similar to *Probe 3: A Day of Social Platforms* (§ 5.2.1.2.3, p. 68), the probe cards are A4 sheets with an instruction sheet paper-clipped to the front (see Figure 5.10). The cards themselves offer a number of prompts about the platforms participants envision as a way to provide structure. Like the other probes, participants are given

A day of social platforms

We often use a multitude of social platforms throughout our days. The way that they're used varies depending on factors like our state of mind, where we are, the situations we find ourselves in, the content we come across, the people we're interacting with and the platforms we happen to be drawn to or prompted to open. This probe asks you to map out your experiences with social platforms across a whole day from when you first pickup your devices to when you put them down at the end of your day. In doing so, try to include as much detail about the context of where you're at (mentally and physically) as you do about what you're doing on each social platform you cross paths with.

Instructions

Annotate the timeline with how you use social platforms over the course of a day. You might like to do this for multiple different days and there's a few sheets provided to allow you to do this. Include the date and a legend in the top left if you want to make use of the coloured dots or draw your own symbols.

Things you might want to include:

- Which social platforms you're using and when
- What triggered you to use that social platform at that moment
- What/when you post
- Who you're interacting with if there's a specific person or group
- Where you are and what else you're doing
- How you're feeling

Figure 5.7: The instruction sheet provided for *Probe 3: A Day of Social Platforms*.

the option to draw their responses by sketching out what the platform looks like.

We now move to describing how we conducted the study, including how the probe kit we designed was used with participants.

5.2.2 Piloting the study

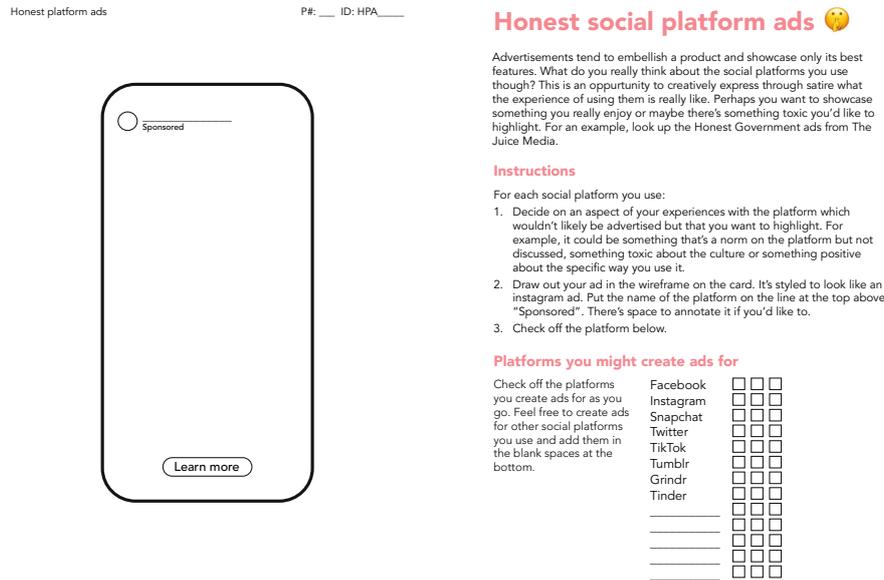
The study was piloted with two participants who completed all activities. Data generated with these participants was not analysed; however, their involvement helped to test the interview guide and the use of the probe kit. Although it was important to have verified that the interview questions and probe kit made sense to participants, and generated desirable responses, only minor issues were identified through the pilot. For example, we realised that the double-sided Social Platform Character card template only had an ID on one side, and this could make it harder to match the front and back of cards once scanned.

5.2.3 Participant recruitment

Similar to Study 1, we used social platform posts to recruit participants for this study¹³. The posts included a brief call-out, information about the study and participation, and links to register interest. Using the author's status as an insider in the community we are studying, we shared the posts on his social platform accounts and asked those in his network to re-share them. We shared the posts on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and LinkedIn¹⁴. We also used Instagram's "Boost" paid

¹³ See *Participant recruitment* (§ 4.2.1, p. 53).

¹⁴ See Appendix B.2: *Recruitment material* (p. 297) for the posts which were used.



(a) The design of the probe card for Probe 4: Honest Platform Ads.

(b) The instructions printed on the envelope containing the probe cards.

Figure 5.8: The probe card design and instructions for Probe 4: Honest Platform Ads.

advertising feature to increase the visibility of the post to those outside my extended networks as Instagram is widely used by those in the queer community.

Those who saw the ads were directed to a screening survey with there was more information about the study and where they could express their interest in being involved and provide contact details. Similar to Study 1, this survey included questions which we used to determine eligibility to be involved and to select a varied range of demographics and experiences. As noted in *Focusing on queer young men* (§ 1.5.1, p. 5), this study restricted the demographic of participants compared to *Study 1*. Therefore, the survey asked participants to self-describe how they identified with the target group for the study (gay, bisexual and queer men). We also asked participants to indicate on a scale how often they used different popular social platforms, with the option to list other platforms they regularly used. This helped to ensure a coverage of a wide range of social platforms when selecting participants.

After selecting participants to be involved, we then contacted them to thank them for registering and to provide further information and instructions. We directed participants to a link where they could pick a time-slot that suited them for each interview. Participants were provided with a document following the standard university human research template, which outlined involvement, risks and how their data would be treated. Before the first interview, participants signed a consent form, or, following a script, provided verbal consent ¹⁵. Overall, we recruited 24 participants. See Table 5.1 for participant details.

¹⁵ See Appendix B.1: *Information and consent documents* (p. 292) for the consent forms used.

Your ideal social platform P#: ___ ID: ISP _____ Use the space below to sketch out what your new platform might look like. You might like to draw the interface, sketch out how people can use it, to make a mindmap or do something completely different with the space. It's up to you.

Your new platform's name:

What's its slogan?

Who is it for/who do you use it with?

How do you use it? On what devices?

What kind of content do people share?

What's new about it and what's the same?

Anything else you want to say about it?

Figure 5.9: The design of the sheet for *Probe 5: Your Ideal Social Platform*.

5.2.4 Participant involvement

Involvement in the study consisted of an initial interview, an approximately 2-week period to complete the probe kit and a final interview. This structure of getting participants to do the probes between both interviews served a practical purpose – allowing for handover of the kit after the first and a space to discuss the completed probes in the second. In addition, we designed it this way to build rapport with the participants, and to sensitise them to the research. As Wright and McCarthy (2010) write, participants' responses to activities such as probes are:

“shaped in part by the person's understanding of the purpose of the project, in part by the nature of their relationship with the person for whom they are creating the response (usually the designer/researcher), and in part by their own history of experiences and the sense of self they construct for the designer/researcher.” Wright and McCarthy (2010, p. 65)

By conducting the first interview before handing over the probes, participants could be introduced to the research and the purpose of the probe kit while also beginning to build a trusting relationship with me. They were not completing the probes for a stranger with whom they had never interacted, as part of a project they only knew the vague details of from an online advertisement. Instead, they were able to develop an understanding of the project and a sense of who they were completing the probes for. The importance of this foundation became clear as a number of participants opened up more about their use of social platforms when completing

Your ideal social platform

Most of us join platforms because of who or what's on them and what they allow us to do but often they're not perfect and have their flaws. Here's your chance to imagine what your ideal social platform would look like. You might like to base it on a platform you already use, combine the best features of multiple platforms you use or dream up something entirely new.

Instructions

Start dreaming up what your ideal social platform would look like then:

- Answer the questions about your imagined platform on the left
- Use the space on the right of the page to sketch out what your new platform might look like. You might like to draw the interface, sketch out how people can use it, make a mindmap or do something completely different with the space. It's up to you.

Tips

- Try thinking about the things you value about the social platforms you use. Maybe it has to do with the people you interact with there, the culture of the platform or its features.
- Think about the things that frustrate or annoy you about the platforms you use. Here's your chance to show how you'd fix them in your ideal platform.
- If you run out of space, use the back of the page.

Figure 5.10: The instruction sheet provided for *Probe 5: Your Ideal Social Platform*.

the probes. For example, P11 described that in the first interview, he was not sure whether he wanted to mention that he had a NSFW Twitter account in addition to the main account he talked about. While he said that the NSFW scale on the *Probe 1: Social Platform Characters* (§ 5.2.1.2.1, p. 66) cards made him realise that it was ok to talk about, that he “wasn't sure if [he] would bombard [the author] with that in like the first five minutes of speaking to [him] ever”.

The first interview served to get a broad sense of how participants experienced and felt about their use of social platforms. Questions were related to their use of social platforms, how they used them in their daily lives, what they saw as their positives and negatives, how they had used them to learn about being queer, whether they had experienced harassment or homophobia, how they thought their use shaped the way they see themselves and whether they had tried to change their use at any point.

At the end of the interview, the probe kit was explained ¹⁶. We described the purpose of the kit and walked through each of the activities, showing examples completed by the author and pilot participants. We made the decision to show examples to help participants understand the probes and see how the kit could be used. However, participants did not have access to these examples when completing the kit so that they would not be tempted to copy or recreate what had been shown. Finally, we handed over the probe kit, or arranged a drop-off if the interview was being conducted online. When we collected the probes approximately two days before the second interview, we digitised all of the probe cards they had completed.

¹⁶ See *Using probes* (§ 5.2.1, p. 63) for more information about the probes and how they were used.

Table 5.1: Participant details

P #	Age	Queer identity	Cultural background	Both interviews
1	26	Gay	Australian/Italian	Y
2	25	Gay	White/rural	Y
3	21	Gay	Asian (Chinese, Vietnamese and Cambodian)	Y
4	21	Gay	Australian/Italian	Y
5	23	Queer	White	Y
6	27	Gay	Aboriginal/English	N
7	26	Gay	German/Hungarian	Y
8	20	Gay	White Australian/New Zealander	Y
9	25	Gay	Māori	Y
10	20	Gay	White Australian	Y
11	18	Bisexual transman	White	Y
12	19	Queer	Ashkenazi Jew/Russian/Hungarian	N
13	18	Gay	North Indian	N
14	26	Gay	NZ European	Y
15	26	Gay	Latin	Y
16	25	Gay	White	Y
17	20	Gay	White Australian	Y
18	24	Bisexual	Asian-Australian	Y
19	25	Gay	Caucasian European	Y
20	20	Gay	Filipino	N
21	22	Bisexual	White Australian	Y
22	22	Bisexual transman	Chinese	Y
23	22	Queer	White	Y
24	20	Gay	Taiwanese, Italian and Australian	Y

We then put the digital versions into a slideshow document so that we could present them back to participants for discussion in the second interview. During analysis, we returned to these Keynote presentations to refer to the probes as we coded the interview transcripts.

The second interview used the scanned probes to guide the discussion. Participants were asked to describe each probe and then asked follow-up questions. After going through all of the probes, additional questions were asked. These related to how participants used platforms when interacting with new people, including any safety strategies they used, if they performed any retroactive curation of their profiles or audiences, how they linked between or used platforms in concert with each other, whether they had used them to disclose their identities and if they used any of the platforms for interacting with or posting NSFW content.

Of the initial 24 participants, 20 completed the probe kit and both interviews. The other 4 participants decided to discontinue involvement after the first interview. They were given the option for their data from the first interview to be deleted, but none opted for this. Participants were offered the choice of doing interviews over Zoom, or in-person in a private room at the university. Interviews were audio

recorded and then anonymised during transcription ¹⁷.

5.2.5 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), we used Reflexive Thematic Analysis to analyse the transcripts of participant interviews and develop themes. We transcribed the interviews as part of the data familiarisation process. We then read through the transcripts and coded them inductively and descriptively using Atlas.ti. After initial coding, we organised and refined the codes. We used the resulting codes to create initial themes, which he then mapped out visually and grouped into six overarching themes. Throughout this process, the author consulted with his doctoral supervisors, who, through discussion, contributed to refining the initial codes and developing, naming and organising themes ¹⁸.

5.3 Findings

Through our analysis, we constructed six overarching themes, each of which group a number of related themes. In turn, each theme comprises a number of sub-themes which detail particular aspects of participants experiences. Figure 5.11 provides an overview of all the themes we present. We start by exploring how participants engaged with LGBTQ+ content on social platforms.

5.3.1 Engaging with LGBTQ+ content

For many participants, the exposure to LGBTQ+ content provided by social platforms was one of their greatest benefits. In this overarching theme, we discuss this through three main themes:

- *Learning about and accepting one's identity* (§ 5.3.1.1, p. 76).
- *Connecting with LGBTQ+ history and current events* (§ 5.3.1.2, p. 82).
- *Navigating algorithmic suggestions* (§ 5.3.1.3, p. 86).

5.3.1.1 Learning about and accepting one's identity

As we discuss in this theme, many participants talked about the ways that social platforms helped them learn about their identities and situate themselves within the LGBTQ+ community. We describe this across two sub-themes:

- *Learning about being LGBTQ+* (§ 5.3.1.1.1, p. 76).
- *Becoming more accepting of oneself based on online content* (§ 5.3.1.1.2, p. 81).

5.3.1.1.1 Learning about being LGBTQ+ Many participants saw social platforms as having provided information about being queer that they would have

¹⁷ See *Data collection and analysis* (§ 3.5, p. 45) for more details.

¹⁸ See *Reflexive thematic analysis* (§ 3.5.2, p. 46) for more details about the use of Reflexive Thematic Analysis in this research.



Figure 5.11: An overview of the themes we constructed from this study. Overarching themes are represented by the top-level boxes with numbered names, which correspond to sections in the text (e.g., 1. Engaging with LGBTQ+ content is § 5.3.1). Themes are represented by the second-level boxes with bolded names, and contain sub-themes with names written in italics.

been otherwise unable to access¹⁹. Being able to access queer content without having to disclose one's identity could also be a major benefit to using social platforms in this way. For example, P13 described how growing up within very conservative family and school environments meant that the anonymity of using platforms such as Reddit to learn about being queer made it "really powerful". Similarly, a number of participants described that they did not know or have exposure to other queer people in the physical realm and that social platforms compensated for this. For example, as P6 shared:

"I was mainly brought up, like many other people, in a heterosexual sort of fairytale with people around me, and the social networks kind of provided me an escape to actually find out who I am, and connect with other people that were similar." [P6]

The platforms participants described using to learn about being queer varied, however, most participants highlighted Instagram and TikTok as the platforms they currently used the most. Some participants also spoke about Tumblr as being the platform where they were first exposed to LGBTQ+ content. In addition, some participants mentioned YouTube as a platform where they had learned about being queer, whether by watching other LGBTQ+ people share their experiences, or watching educational videos on topics like queer theory, which P12 gave as an example. As we describe below²⁰, the design of platforms and the way their algorithms presented content could also shape where and how participants learned about being queer.

For a number of participants, seeing the way other people presented or talked about their experiences, or the queer community, helped them explore, develop and situate their identities. For example, P22 described how being on Tumblr and interacting with trans people helped him realise that he too was trans:

"So I'm a trans man, and I definitely wouldn't have figured it out if I wasn't online. I think because I was just like, had a bit of a hatred for myself. But I didn't like realise what it was until like I was online, and then kind of just like seeing everyone else and what they're going through. I was just like, 'I want that, that's what I'm going through, I want that lifestyle' you know?"

Well, it wasn't like, I wasn't looking for [trans people]. It just happened that like... the best friend that I made on Tumblr was trans. And he was like, he would tell me about his experiences. And I'd be like, 'You know what, me too, I feel that' and then, you know, went from there." [P22]

As some participants described, exposure to queer content online was a way to learn the language of the queer community. This could be related to terminology and the

¹⁹ Similar to this, in *Meeting other queer and trans young men* (§ 5.3.6.1, p. 145), we discuss how social platforms provided opportunities to meet peers participants felt they otherwise would not have met.

²⁰ See *Algorithmic exposure to LGBTQ+ content* (§ 5.3.1.3.1, p. 86).

way people presented, as the quote below from P4 describes. However, participants also talked about learning about fashion and style, mannerisms, or humour.

“Learning about different terminology within the queer community, as well as learning about how different people express themselves. Like, I don’t wanna say, like, I’m taking like, bits and pieces from them. But it’s like observing these people and observing like this information, it makes me understand myself better, and then helps me grow as a person and express myself better.” [P4]

While P13 described how empowered he was by the “breadth” of information and perspectives about being LGBTQ+ he found on social platforms, some participants talked about how seeing content online that presented a narrow version of what it means to be a queer man could make it harder to figure out who they were ²¹. For example, P11 shared:

“I think there’s definitely a massive amount of opportunity for self-comparison with other people or larger content creators who are sharing their own journeys. Because there’s so many different ways to exist as a queer person. And I think sometimes fitting a script is... there’s a lot of pressure to fit a script or to exist in a certain way, and not fitting that script or not fitting that template or mould, can make it more difficult to understand your own sort of sense of self and identity.” [P11]

However, some participants described how seeing such content had helped them, as P18 put it, work out “what not kind of queer” they were. Whether participants saw content they found empowering or demoralising, many commented on how exposure to different ways of being a queer man helped them reflect on who they were. However, reality did not always meet expectations for participants, and they did not always end up liking the version of queer life that they had seen and imagined for themselves. For example, P2 described how as a teenager living in a rural area, social platforms had given him a glimpse of queer life in cities where there were pride events and bars and parties, but how upon living in Sydney himself, he quickly realised he was not interested in them.

Beyond learning the language of the queer community, a number of participants also talked about how social platforms had been a useful source of information for navigating life as a queer person ²². For example, some participants shared that content on social platforms had also helped them learn about LGBTQ+ relationships, consent and sexual health. While some participants described this happening through exposure to resources or information from community organisations, this could also be from seeing people talking about their experiences.

²¹ See *Images of what it is to be a queer man are not diverse* (§ 5.3.3.1.1, p. 95) for more discussion of this issue.

²² As we discuss in *Connecting with LGBTQ+ history and current events* (§ 5.3.1.2, p. 82), social platforms also helped participants learn more about the community at large.

Moments worth screenshotting

Draw the moment below or upload it to the dropbox then answer the questions on the right.

Describe the moment:
An online friend sharing their feelings about showing his bf around hometown

When and where was it?
Perth, last two days

Which platform/account?
Insta main

Why is it a moment worth screenshotting?
Made me reflect my own recent desires to take my boyfriend to Newcastle and show him all my favourite spots and possibly meet some of my friends, without overwhelming him.

"these first few days have already been so beautiful. I am feeling so happy and blessed to be in my home city with the love of my life. Waiting eagerly for him to see every place I grew up in and meet every person who has been such a special part of my life 🥰🥰"

Queer culture
+
Positive vibes

P#: 19 ID: MWS_P9

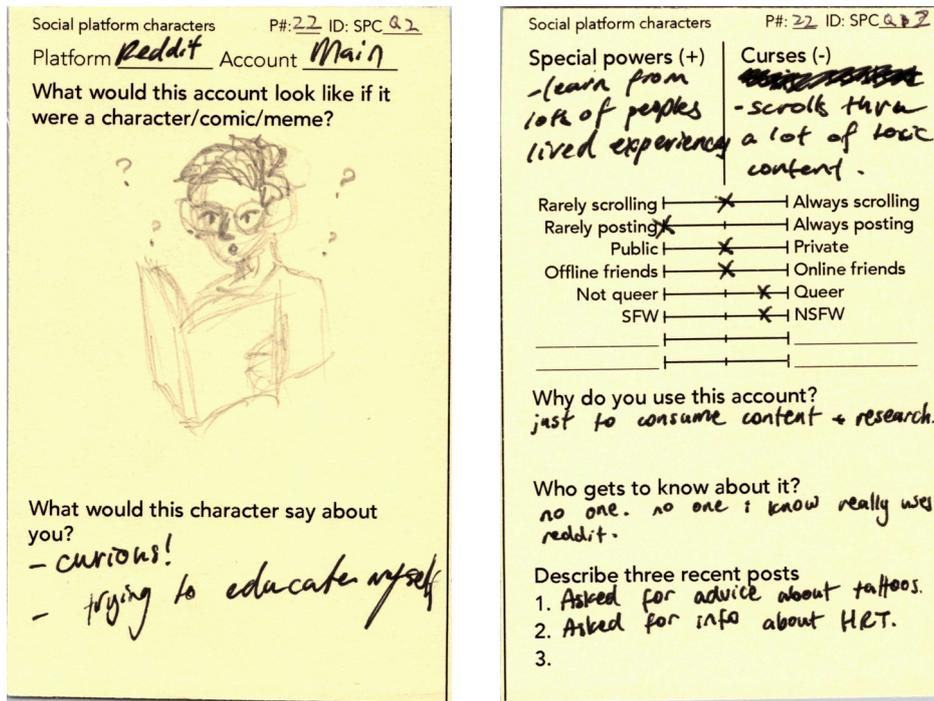
Figure 5.12: A Moments Worth Screenshotting card P19 created for Instagram.

For example, P4 commented that much of the content he sees on TikTok is people talking about traumatic experiences they have had, but doing so in a lighthearted way that makes it easier to engage with and learn from. Even content that was just showing people living their lives could help participants reflect on their own experiences. For example, P19 created a Moments Worth Screenshotting card describing how seeing someone he follows show their boyfriend around their hometown made him reflect on how he might do something similar in his relationship (see Figure 5.12). As he described, this was his first relationship since moving to Sydney and so things were “so fresh and new” for him.

Some participants talked about using Reddit as a resource for learning about being queer or trans. For example, P22 created a Social Platform Character card for Reddit describing using it to do research, learn from others’ experiences and educate himself (see Figure 5.13). While he shared that he has not gotten much helpful advice from posting on the platform ²³, he described an active local trans community on the platform where he has found information about where to get gender affirming care. Similarly, a number of participants talked about how they use Reddit to research topics of interest and learn about peoples’ experiences. Often this related to LGBTQ+ groups but for some participants it was more about hobbies ²⁴.

²³ This was similar to other participants’ experiences on Reddit as we discuss in *Posting to get support* (§ 5.3.5.2.1, p. 138).

²⁴ As we describe in *Finding community and peer support in online groups* (§ 5.3.6.1.2, p. 146), such groups could also be a place to find peers.



(a) The front of the card.

(b) The back of the card.

Figure 5.13: The Social Platform Character card P22 created for Reddit.

5.3.1.1.2 Becoming more accepting of oneself based on online content

Many participants described how content they saw online had helped them become more accepting of themselves. For a number of participants, seeing people online with experiences they could relate to had helped them feel less alone or as though they needed to change who they were to fit in. For example, P8 described seeking out queer content when he was younger and how it reduced internalised homophobia for him by normalising his identity. Participants who grew up in conservative or religious environments often related the positive impacts of being exposed to queer content as helping them see their identities in more positive lights. For example, P24 described:

“I think what I find beneficial as a queer person is that [social platforms allowed] me to learn of other queer people’s experiences, what they’ve gone through, because at the time when I was growing up queer and learning about my identity, I was, as I was conflicted, I was torn, and it didn’t help that I was raised in a private high school, it was religious coeducational... I was scared that if I was discovered I would get expelled, or if not that, then I would be ostracised and bullied by my peers, because there used to be a lot of homophobic jokes and comments that I would hear regularly.” [P24]

Some participants described how content they saw online that included messages about self-acceptance or described overcoming struggles related to queer identity were particularly helpful. For example, while P4 described that seeing people living

their best life on TikTok could have a negative impact²⁵, affirming content he saw on the platform had made him feel more confident in himself. Similarly, although P11 could engage in negative self-comparison to others' journeys of transitioning, he also found it beneficial seeing people "giving their messages of support to younger trans people". Similarly, as P23 described, seeing other people's experiences helped him envision a positive future for himself:

"[Social platforms] allow a forum for people to share their experiences of being queer, and often find that a lot of people have had the same feelings. And in that, there is like, a feeling of community and belonging, and, I guess, shared experiences... I don't know if it's like positive to say shared trauma, but like, we like therapise each other, or in our common experiences... even like talking to someone younger on social media, like, it's good to give someone like that perspective... to be like, 'I had a really similar experience to you and like, everything's gonna be okay.'" [P23]

5.3.1.2 Connecting with LGBTQ+ history and current events

In addition to helping participants learn about being LGBTQ+ and feel more comfortable in themselves, social platforms connected them to the wider community and exposed them to information about queer issues, both current and historical. In this theme, we discuss the ways that social platforms did this across three sub-themes:

- *Learning about the wider community and LGBTQ+ issues and politics* (§ 5.3.1.2.1, p. 82).
- *Needing to engage with LGBTQ+ content* (§ 5.3.1.2.2, p. 83).
- *Sharing political content* (§ 5.3.1.2.3, p. 84).

5.3.1.2.1 Learning about the wider community and LGBTQ+ issues and politics

Participants highlighted Instagram and TikTok as the two main platforms that had helped them learn about the LGBTQ+ community, although some of those who were older also talked about Tumblr. Some participants described "info slides"²⁶ on Instagram as a common way they learned about LGBTQ+ issues and history. Examples of posts participants described seeing included those related to significant days in the LGBTQ+ community, such as World AIDS Day; about legislation relating to queer and trans people; concerning tragedies; or about local happenings. While the content participants saw could be localised, many commented that it helped expose them to news from other countries as well. As some participants noted, seeing content relating to queer history and issues was particularly important to them because they were not exposed to such topics in school, or elsewhere in the physical realm.

²⁵ See *Feeling bad about oneself and engaging in negative self-comparison* (§ 5.3.3.1.3, p. 96) for a description of this.

²⁶ Info slides are Instagram posts that provide informational content, often through a combination of pictures and texts across multiple images that viewers can slide through.

Even if participants did not seek out such content themselves, many described how they saw it when their friends shared them, and that it helped them learn about what was happening in the community. On the other hand, a number of participants highlighted that they intentionally followed LGBTQ+ news accounts or influencers that talked about queer and trans issues. Beyond history and politics, a number of participants also described how they followed LGBTQ+ people on social platforms to stay up to date with culture. For example, P9 shared:

“I think queer culture is incredible. I think we have best taste in food, the best taste in music, the best taste in politics, like I think queer culture, especially on social media, I think there’s a lot of like queer people who post incredible things... They’re really good people to follow as well [and] I think less queer people should follow them, too.” [P9]

As well as providing information about LGBTQ+ history, current events and culture on a global scale, some participants described how social platforms helped them engage with local communities. For many, local accounts helped them learn about events where they could interact with peers in the physical realm. For example, both P7 and P20 mentioned following the Instagram account of a local bar and how that connected helped them know what was happening in the community. While posts were often about events that were happening, P20 highlighted that they often post about local news and notable people, and how this could help him learn about the community. The events they advertised could also provide connections to peers that helped participants on their journeys. For example, when P7 was asked if social platforms had helped him learn about being queer, he responded:

“To a certain extent, but it’s mostly been about... coming across events that are on and things like that, like, [local queer bar] as a venue and things like that, that are just happening, less learn from them, and more found spaces where I can go and be with other people and kind of learn that way.” [P7]

5.3.1.2.2 Needing to engage with LGBTQ+ content A number of participants described keeping up to date and engaging with issues in the LGBTQ+ community as imperative or part of a civic duty. For example, P20 saw knowing the queer community’s history as “very very crucial” to his sense of identity as queer. For P21, staying engaged with LGBTQ+ news is an important aspect of being part of the community. Even if he described finding it as “fucking depressing” and “sometimes quite sad”, he shared that he sees a duty to stay engaged:

“I feel like it’s the same reason you read the news. It’s just being a good person, a good citizen, being engaged with the world that’s going on beyond you. And being aware of that world, same sense. Gay news and gay content, making sure that you’re aware of what’s going on in the community. You’re aware of other people’s problems and remind yourself sometimes of how nice it is to have your life.” [P21]

As P23 highlighted, following LGBTQ+ accounts could also provide perspectives from others in the community:

“I think that especially gay men have a tendency to isolate their experience as queer away from the rest of the queer community. And I think that following ABC Queer ²⁷ has given me a lot of perspective, I’m always looking for more perspective on the experiences of more of the LGBT community, because I just don’t want to get like, tunnel vision with like, just gay men all the time. I feel like there’s a lot more to it than that.” [P23]

In addition to keeping up to date with political issues, some participants described how they felt the need to follow queer accounts to stay up to date with popular culture in the community. For example, P1 talked about using TikTok because he wants to “stay up to date with the latest trends”. For P23, following LGBTQ+ focused publications could serve a dual purpose, helping him learn about the community’s history while keeping his knowledge of queer culture relevant:

“I kind of feel like I have an obligation to be up on the sorts of things because, I mean, like, people, it’s always like a topical conversation that you want to be up on. Like, you want to educate yourself on like queer history, and you want to be aware of queer culture and how it evolves.” [P23]

5.3.1.2.3 Sharing political content In addition to using social platforms to learn about LGBTQ+ politics and current events, many participants talked about how they shared content relating to them. Instagram was the platform participants talked the most about using to share political content, most often by reposting info slides to their stories. Some participants ascribed this to the ease of which content can be posted on the platform or the wider audiences they had compared to other platforms. For example, P15 described that he had a much wider reach on Instagram compared to Facebook, where he felt his audience was smaller and less dynamic. Platform dynamics could also influence this. For example, participants were much more likely to post on Instagram and have an audience there compared to TikTok which is more focused on content consumption. As P4 described, “TikTok’s really where I get the information, Instagram is where I share”.

Usually participants described sharing posts created by others instead of creating new content, however, this was not always the case. For example, a number of participants recounted creating posts about their experiences when they saw an issue as affecting them personally. The marriage equality postal vote in Australia ²⁸ was one such issue that multiple participants brought up as something they posted

²⁷ The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) is a national broadcaster in Australia. Their Instagram account ABC Queer describes itself as “ABC Australia’s account for everyone under the rainbow” covering “LGBTQIA+ stories and advice” (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2025).

²⁸ See *The Australian context* (§ 2.3.2, p. 14) for more details.

their personal perspectives on ²⁹.

Although some participants shied away from sharing content about LGBTQ+ politics and current events ³⁰, others described moral imperatives to do so. For example, P24 described sharing information he saw on Instagram about the Club Q shooting because it showed to him the impact of homophobia and “that it’s important to fight for our lives for our rights and that we exist and we matter”. Similarly, P20 described how he uses his large following on Instagram to inform others of what is happening in the community, and his dismay that not everyone does similar:

“I think it’s necessary to have, you know, other fellow queer individuals use their voices and their platforms to educate others and inform others about what’s happening in the world... I’ve noticed that with a lot of... people who have some sort of following online, who come from our community, they tend to you know, they stick to their brand of whatever they post, but when it comes to like social issues, it’s like, ‘oh, you’re silent. Where are you?’ And I think it’s important for people in the community with a following, to really set that example and make content that’s not just about themselves, not just about, you know, I have a six pack, I have this, I have that...” [P20]

In contrast, a number of participants described how they do not share political content because they do not feel they have a large enough following to make an impact. Similarly, some participants perceived that sharing political content could be unimpactful or performative. For example, while P14 thought that info slides could be informative, he did not think posts designed to change people’s mentality about issues, or to purely show support for the community by posting an image, had a big impact. Similarly, while P12 described learning about LGBTQ+ issues from social media posts, he commented that they could often be performative and that he reads them critically because he is worried about misinformation.

The nature of the content being shared could shape participants willingness to share it. Some participants described being more willing to share content that encouraged people to take direct actions because they saw it as more impactful. For example, P14 described sharing a petition to ban conversion therapy, and P3 talked about sharing GoFundMe appeals. How saturated platforms were with content about an issue could also shape this. For example, P10 described how he is much more willing to share political content that adds a different perspective to the bulk of what he sees, or highlights an underrepresented issue. Whether or not participants felt they were the right person to share their opinion on a particular issue could also be a factor. For example, while P16 described his reluctance to post on issues in case he

²⁹ As we discuss in *Asserting identity using social platforms* (§ 5.3.2.2, p. 92), a number of participants chose to disclose their queerness as a response to the marriage equality campaign.

³⁰ See *Self-censoring to avoid saying the wrong thing* (§ 5.3.4.1.4, p. 112) where we discuss some participants’ reasons for not sharing such content.

offends someone³¹, he also highlighted that tries to give space to others in situations where he does not see his voice as being as important as that of others, for instance, when it comes to women’s rights.

5.3.1.3 Navigating algorithmic suggestions

Participants had mixed views about the algorithms that determined what content they were shown on social platforms. Some commented that the algorithms showed them exactly what they wanted while others lamented they did not have enough control over what was shown. In this theme, we describe how participants navigated and perceived the algorithms that presented content to them across various platforms. We do this across two sub-themes:

- *Algorithmic exposure to LGBTQ+ content* (§ 5.3.1.3.1, p. 86).
- *Concerns around algorithmic presentation of content* (§ 5.3.1.3.2, p. 87).

5.3.1.3.1 Algorithmic exposure to LGBTQ+ content Some participants commented on how they observed the algorithms on platforms presenting them with LGBTQ+ content. Some actively sought out queer content and were then presented with more, while others described stumbling across it unintentionally. Although algorithms opting to present queer content could be problematic when idealised content was presented³², participants described how seeing content that was relatable or affirming could have a positive impact, as we describe above³³. Similarly, advertisements for LGBTQ+ organisations could be helpful for building awareness of local services and happenings. For example, P3 described how he discovered a range of different groups from ads and how they then had helped him learn about being queer.

Differences in the way platforms present content could shape participants’ exposure to queer media. For example, P5 thought that TikTok and Twitter were better for learning about being queer and finding community compared to Instagram, because they were more likely to present content from people who were not existing connections. Although not all participants agreed, he also saw TikTok as being less “based on pure aesthetics or beauty” and thought that this meant that the platform presented a wider range of content. Similarly, P4 described the wide range of content being presented on TikTok and how this enabled him to learn about different communities:

“I think it’s just the diversity of the content that’s on there... It’s not like one sort of thing that’s consistent on the, on the platform, it’s anything you can really think of, someone has like made content related to that. And there’s so many different communities on TikTok as well that you can relate to. And then there’s even communities that you might not relate to, but you’re interested in like learning about. And I

³¹ See *Self-censoring to avoid saying the wrong thing* (§ 5.3.4.1.4, p. 112) where this is described.

³² See *Algorithmic presentation of idealised content* (§ 5.3.3.2.2, p. 106)

³³ See *Becoming more accepting of oneself based on online content* (§ 5.3.1.1.2, p. 81).

think, having that diversity on TikTok, like, it's great, it's good for everyone, because somebody can, like find this sort of, like community that they belong to, or they might discover, like, you know, oh I actually belonged to like, you know, X, Y, and Z that I didn't initially think of before." [P4]

5.3.1.3.2 Concerns around algorithmic presentation of content While algorithms presented content that participants wanted to see could be positive, some described how this could feel uncomfortable or lead them to spending more time on platforms than they wanted³⁴. For example, P1 described that the TikTok algorithm is "a bit creepy", saying that "it's scarily good at profiling you and then just showing you videos that suit you or that you will keep watching". Some participants described their interest in seeing how content was being targeted at them. For example, P2 shared that he has looked at his ad profile on some platforms and that he is curious to see how TikTok has classified his interests, although he is not sure if it is possible on the platform.

Concerns about being part of a "filter bubble" or "echo chamber" were described by a number of participants. As we discuss above³⁵, many participants were conscious of how interacting with content on platforms could lead algorithms to suggest more of it. Some described how that could lead to them only being presented a narrow view of the world, or how that contributed to seeing only one kind of queer man³⁶. For example P18 shared:

"Social media is funny, right? I mean, you can, you will follow something or you will be a part of something. And it kind of keeps getting being regurgitated at you. I don't know if you're on Twitter, but Twitter is literally the perfect example of that. It literally regurgitates to you your followers are the things that you might like. It never regurgitates the things you dislike, it never regurgitates the things that you should be facing, even if you're uncomfortable with it. And I think that says something about that, you know, and again, it's created communities, which is fine. But I think it's also creating cliques." [P18]

Similarly, P14 described that most of the content he sees is from "white mid-20s gay men". Although he described this negatively, he thought that it could be challenging to "overcome your own biases of looking for people like you". In contrast, some participants described their attempts to break out of the filter bubbles they saw. For example, P22 described how he has set up a blank account on Twitter to have an alternative feed of tweets that is not impacted by who he is following on his main account. For P14, who described the discrimination he had faced, seeking out diverse perspectives is an important duty, as he described:

³⁴ As we discuss in *Engaging with idealised presentations* (§ 5.3.3.2, p. 104), many participants also talked about this in relation to idealised content they saw, both complaining about the amount they were being shown, but also describing how it could be engaging.

³⁵ See *Algorithmic presentation of idealised content* (§ 5.3.3.2.2, p. 106)

³⁶ See *Images of what it is to be a queer man are not diverse* (§ 5.3.3.1.1, p. 95) for more discussion of participants' feelings about this.

“I think that it’s really important... from my experience [at] an all white school, where like you’re the only brown kid and apparently the only queer kid... [it] really opened my eyes up to like, what a very kind of like closed mentality can do and... I think I’ve also grown an understanding for it, because it’s really comfortable, right, it’s so comfortable to like, be in your own perspective... But I feel like the impact of never really stepping outside and just staying in your comfort zone can be so major in terms of like the impacts on the people that you don’t realise you’re having, like, I really saw that first person in my personal life experience, and that’s something I really try to not emulate, to kind of like, correct in like my own behaviour.” [P13]

Multiple participants lamented that feeds algorithm often do not show them all of the posts people they are following have made. For example, P2 commented that despite following a large number of accounts, only a small number of posts in his Instagram feed are from those he follows and that most of the content he is shown is algorithmically suggested or ads. While P6 noted that there are options on Facebook and Twitter to disable the algorithmic feeds, he said that the setting is not permanent and that it often defaulted back. In the other direction, P5 described that he finds that about 10% of his followers view the stories he posts, unless he posts a thirst trap or something similarly sexual, in which case he described getting “twice or even three times as many views on that as [he] would normally”. Although he said that he did not know how the algorithm worked, he thought that Instagram would choose whether or not to show his content to more of his audience based on engagement. On the other hand, some participants appreciated seeing content that was based on their interests and not just who they were following. For example, P1 described how he appreciates that the content he sees on Reddit is presented in topic-based communities (subreddits), and P4 described how he sees platforms other than TikTok as obsolete because it provides him with all the content he wants to see.

Algorithmic suggestions of content could also go awry when they presented content that participants found distressing or disturbing. For example, a number of participants described being presented with homophobic content on social platforms, sometimes as part of paid advertising campaigns. As P6 described:

“[I used Facebook] as sort of like a safe haven to connect with other people, but then you have this questionable content thrown at you... every now and then there would be a lot of hate speech content that’s sponsored, or ad based... when there’s something that’s political happening within the queer community. Take, for example, the [marriage equality postal survey], there was a lot of, advertisements targeted towards me, just because I had gay on my profile. And a lot of it wasn’t factual. A lot of it was just, let’s just throw this in an ad to scare people and not think of the consequences of people that are receiving the ads do.” [P6]

Additionally, P4 described that he has often seen hate speech or violence, homophobic or otherwise, in the videos recommended to him by TikTok, and how this could be distressing. Although perhaps less distressing than being served violent content, some participants also commented how content recommendations that did not have queer representation could be negative. For example, P11 described how he thinks the content recommended on Snapchat is targeted at “straight white cisgender couples” and how this could be irritating.

5.3.2 Curating disclosure

Almost all participants had actively curated disclosure of being queer or trans at some point in their lives. In this overarching theme, we describe how participants did this across two themes:

- *Concealing being queer or trans to avoid negative experiences* (§ 5.3.2.1, p. 89).
- *Asserting identity using social platforms* (§ 5.3.2.2, p. 92).

5.3.2.1 Concealing being queer or trans to avoid negative experiences

Participants often recounted how they self-censored their expressions or interactions on social platforms due to concerns about harassment or adverse reactions. In this theme, we describe three sub-themes related to participants’ practices of concealment:

- *Concealing identity from people they know in the physical realm* (§ 5.3.2.1.1, p. 89).
- *Being more comfortable expressing queerness those who are not cisgender-heterosexual men* (§ 5.3.2.1.2, p. 91).
- *Navigating homophobia, biphobia and transphobia on social platforms* (§ 5.3.2.1.3, p. 92).

5.3.2.1.1 Concealing identity from people they know in the physical realm Many participants described how they had concealed being queer or trans from audiences they thought would be unsupportive. For example, a number of participants described hiding their identities from family, colleagues or peers. As participants described, the perceived backlash or rejection they might face for disclosing being LGBTQ+ online was a deciding factor in concealing it. Often, participants related this fear to religious home or school environments that were homophobic. For example, P18 described why he does not post queer content on Facebook:

“It’s an extremely conscious decision, I have very religious family members on both sides. I think if they saw pictures of me with my boyfriend, they would probably fall apart and end up in a puddle.” [P18]

Some participants described being strategic about who they disclosed being queer or

trans to. For example, P1 shared how he tries to determine whether new people he meets will be supportive before allowing them to learn he is queer. Similarly, many participants described concealing being queer or trans based on the audiences of each platform. For example, many hid their identities on Facebook due to having family as part of their audience on the platform. Conversely, where participants' audiences were largely friends, or people they thought were more supportive, they could be more open about their identities³⁷. Similarly, a number of participants described how they could be more open about their identities on their Instagram Close Friends story³⁸, where posts would only be shown to a restricted audience of their choosing. For some participants, this ability to express their identities to supportive audiences while concealing it from others, was one of the main positives they saw of social platforms. As P15 described:

“I think the benefit [of social platforms are] like that you can just kind of be who you want to be or like create the image that you want to create, like that you feel comfortable with – that you won't be comfortable sharing with your family and school friends” [P15]

Often, participants curated audiences retroactively³⁹. Several deleted and recreated their accounts, only adding back people they were close to or knew to be supportive. Others took less drastic measures and reported occasionally curating their list of followers to remove people they no longer interacted with or cared to have there. For many participants, this was about removing people from high school they were no longer close to or were socially obliged to have as connections. For P11, this related to transitioning genders:

“I deactivated my Instagram account and started a new one so just the people who I was closest [with] and, who knew what was going on with me could sort of follow it and keep track... because the other people were just kind of like old school friends who I really didn't know and didn't care to take the risk of inviting them on that journey.” [P11]

Beyond posts, concealment could also extend to not interacting with queer or trans content as participants worried that traces of their activity would be shown to others. For example, some participants commented on the way Facebook automatically shares when one RSVPs to an event and how this meant they did not respond to any events associated with the LGBTQ+ community. Similarly, P13 described how automatic tagging of photos on Facebook could lead to unintentional context collapse and lamented the design of such features:

“Social media definitely isn't really designed with privacy as a foremost

³⁷ In this overarching theme, we focus on describing participants' curation efforts related to disclosure of their identities. However, participants also curated spaces with trusted audiences for reasons other than concealing being LGBTQ+, as we discuss in *Being more authentic with trusted audiences* (§ 5.3.5.1, p. 131).

³⁸ See *Distinction between posts and stories* (§ 5.3.4.1.2, p. 109) for a detailed explanation of the differences between posts and stories, and how participants perceived them.

³⁹ As part of *Self-censoring to avoid saying the wrong thing* (§ 5.3.4.1.4, p. 112), we describe how participants retroactively curated the content of their profiles.

thing... But I think... a massive part of the queer community is privacy, and that just isn't ingrained in social media as a default. Like the whole idea is you have access to everyone and everyone has access to you."

[P13]

As we describe in the next theme, concealment of identity extended beyond simply whether they were queer or trans.

5.3.2.1.2 Being more comfortable expressing queerness those who are not cisgender-heterosexual men Beyond disclosure, several participants described how they were more comfortable expressing themselves to fellow queer and trans men (and often women regardless of sexuality as well). While they felt the need to present a more masculine or heteronormative front-stage performance that they perceived as acceptable to cisgender straight men, their backstage performances to others could subvert this. For some participants, this meant that they curated spaces where they could present queerer sides of themselves. For example, P21 described that most people on his Close Friends are queer.

Similarly, some did not feel comfortable expressing themselves to straight men using queer slang or in ways they saw as more feminine, and this meant they code-switched the language they would use depending on their audience, even if their queerness was widely known. For example, P8 described how even the emoji he uses varies. Similarly, multiple participants spoke about sharing a sense of humour with LGBTQ+ friends that they did not share with those who were straight and that this shaped the kinds of jokes they would make or content they shared. Participants often ascribed this to having shared experiences of being LGBTQ+ that would allow them to understand the content.

"With my queer friends I'm definitely like, more out there, like definitely more like, you know, heyyyyyy, slay queen!! That's not to say, I'm not like that with my straight guy friends. Like, I'm like that with my straight guy friends as well, except I just kind of gotta I gotta shift, like, my sense of humour, or like, when it comes to like debating social issues, I kind of gotta, like, shift, not shift my perspective but explain it in a much more different way than, you know... my queer friends would be able to understand it with the lingo and all." [P20]

Some participants also described differences in the ways that their cisgender straight male friends interacted with them. For example, both P20 and P21 described that their queer audiences were much more engaged and responsive to the content that they shared and that there are different norms about the kinds of reactions that are acceptable. To illustrate this difference, P21 shared that, "very rarely would I ever react to straight man's story and be like, 'I love your outfit'. You just don't. They'd be like, 'what the fuck is wrong with you?'".

5.3.2.1.3 Navigating homophobia, biphobia and transphobia on social platforms Although many participants described that they had little experience of harassment or abusive on social platforms related to being queer or trans, this was not the case for all. Unfortunately, a significant number of participants described experiencing harassment over their identities from strangers online ⁴⁰. Often, this was as a result of publicly interacting with LGBTQ+ content. For example, some described how commenting on LGBTQ+ related posts lead to receiving abusive comments in response.

To avoid harassment, a number of participants censored themselves from interacting with LGBTQ+ content or posting about their identities ⁴¹. Many also described having private accounts or restrictive privacy settings that would prevent strangers from seeing or interacting with their posts. Perceptions of safety on platforms could also impact whether participants chose to post. For example, P24 described how he avoids posting anything to Twitter because of how “toxic” he thought the platform could be.

Even if participants were not the targets of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, many described how it could still be confronting or distressing. For example, P8 shared that looking at comments on LGBTQ+ news stories could sometimes take an emotional toll. Seeing anti-LGBTQ+ content could also lead participants to be more concerned about being openly queer or trans. For example, P4 described that while he had not personally been the target of homophobic abuse, seeing others online describe their experiences of being harassed has led him to become more vigilant. As some participants described, particularly in relation to the campaign against marriage equality in Australia ⁴², anti-LGBTQ+ content could also be shared by people they knew. For example, P15 described how he saw many people he knew change their Facebook profile pictures to indicate they were voting against it, and how this “changed completely” his relationship with them.

Some of the bisexual participants described their experiences of biphobia. For example, P22 commented that he has seen people be “very vocally anti-bi” on social platforms. As examples, he described seeing posts where people have argued for removing the B from the LGBTQ+ acronym, and dating app profiles that explicitly excluded bisexual people. Similarly, P18 also mentioned having seen biphobic content online and thought that “people want you to be all of one thing, or all of another thing”.

5.3.2.2 Asserting identity using social platforms

While many participants concealed being queer or trans to protect themselves from harm, social platforms could also provide a place for them to assert their identity.

⁴⁰ As we discuss in *The need to conform to the image of an ideal queer man* (§ 5.3.3.1, p. 95), harassment or discrimination could also be from others in the LGBTQ+ community for not conforming to the image of an ideal queer man.

⁴¹ Participants also discussed other topics they self-censored as we explore in *Self-censoring to avoid saying the wrong thing* (§ 5.3.4.1.4, p. 112).

⁴² See *The Australian context* (§ 2.3.2, p. 14) for details of the plebiscite.

For example, a number of participants explicitly disclosed being queer or trans to broadcast their identities. We describe how participants asserted their identities on social platforms across two sub-theme:

- *Coming out using social platforms* (§ 5.3.2.2.1, p. 93).
- *Making profiles explicitly or implicitly queer or trans* (§ 5.3.2.2.2, p. 94).

5.3.2.2.1 Coming out using social platforms While context collapse on social platforms could be a risk to concealing being queer or trans, some participants made use of the broad networks of social and familial connections they had as audiences to aid disclosure by broadcasting their identities through a post. Often, participants described telling close friends and family members before they made a coming out post, and some described the importance of having those conversations first. For example, P14 described wanting to have face-to-face conversations with extended family members to disclose being queer before posting anything that might reveal his identity to them. While P14 described that it would be cowardly not to have such conversations in person, P8 described how coming out to friends over direct messages made it easier to deal with the emotions involved in disclosure – it was a method to “get it out of the way before [he] saw them” and took the pressure of the eventual in-person conversations. As some participants described, concealing their identities could be burdensome, and broadcasting it could help them disclose it to their wider networks. For example, P7 shared:

“[I kept] forgetting who I’d told and who I hadn’t told and who knew. I had Facebook at the time and decided to just like write one huge post, but that was about it. Mostly because I was sick and tired of like, trying to recall who I’d told. And I was like, I really don’t care. Like I just want this over and done with.” [P7]

For many participants, the reactions to their coming out posts were overwhelmingly positive. However, some participants described receiving negative comments or facing backlash as a result. For example, P1 had someone message him in response saying they did not accept queer marriages due to their religion, and P18 deleted the Facebook post he had made after receiving backlash from some family members who saw it.

For some participants, the desire to express being queer or trans related to feeling more authentic. P19 decided to disclose his queerness before he finished high school because he “wanted to graduate being [himself]”. Similarly, P15 talked about feeling as though he was living a double life between places where he felt comfortable posting queer content and those where he did not. For P18, celebrating his first anniversary of being in a queer relationship was a milestone that made him want to disclose being queer to his family. Others felt compelled to post publicly about being queer or trans in response to homophobic or transphobic events or situations ⁴³. For example, the political debate around the Marriage Equality

⁴³ See *Sharing political content* (§ 5.3.1.2.3, p. 84) for more discussion of participants sharing

Plebiscite in Australia made P16 want to post about his queerness, and P24 disclosed his queerness after becoming fed up with witnessing homophobic behaviour on a Discord server used by school peers.

On the other hand, some participants described that they did not feel a need to explicitly disclose being LGBTQ+. Some, such as P23 described that they felt “people have always just assumed it” of him, while others shared that they might tell people if it came up, but did not want to actively broadcast their identities. Similarly, many participants described the ways that they implicitly shared their identities on social platforms, as we discuss in the following section.

5.3.2.2 Making profiles explicitly or implicitly queer or trans Whether or not they made a “coming out” post, some participants also talked about how they assert being queer or trans through their profile text or posts on social platforms. For example, P24 described how, by having pride flags in his profile bios, everyone would be able to tell he was queer, and he would not have to explain it. Another example was P11 sharing his (gender) transition to his Close Friends story on Instagram. Each month, on the anniversary of starting to take testosterone, he posts a video that goes as follows, “Hi, my name is [redacted], and this is my voice [x number of months] on T”. This not only lets him share his transition progress with those he is close to, but also creates an archive that he wants to be able to look back on in the future.

Others described how their profiles are not explicitly queer or trans but that they might post or interact with content that implicitly discloses their identities. For example, P7 described how his Instagram bio does not mention being queer but that he has photos from Mardi Gras ⁴⁴ on his profile if someone goes looking for them. Similarly, some participants described how they look for such clues on people’s profiles when trying to determine if they are LGBTQ+ as well.

For some, sharing their identities with supportive audiences, or gradually posting more queer content publicly, helped them build the confidence to express it more widely ⁴⁵. For example, P15 described how posting on Tumblr had been his “gateway to opening up about who I was” more widely.

5.3.3 Wrestling with the pressure to conform to the image of an ideal queer man

Many participants described a “toxic” culture in the queer community that made them feel inadequate and as though they had to fit a narrow and unrealistic

political content.

⁴⁴ The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras is an annual event in Sydney akin to pride events elsewhere.

⁴⁵ Similarly, some participants described how posting more authentic versions of themselves (beyond disclosure) to supportive audiences helped them feel more comfortable in themselves. We discuss how they curated spaces to share with trusted audiences in *Being more authentic with trusted audiences* (§ 5.3.5.1, p. 131), and how it could help them shift their perspective in *Maintaining perspective* (§ 5.3.5.3.3, p. 142).

definition of what it means to be a queer man. As part of this overarching theme, we detail two themes:

- *The need to conform to the image of an ideal queer man* (§ 5.3.3.1, p. 95).
- *Engaging with idealised presentations* (§ 5.3.3.2, p. 104).

Elsewhere, we discuss how participants sought validation, often by sharing idealised content ⁴⁶, and how some described overcoming this pressure to conform ⁴⁷.

5.3.3.1 The need to conform to the image of an ideal queer man

This theme explores how participants' described pressures to conform to an idealised version of what it means to be a queer man. It does so across five sub-themes:

- *Images of what it is to be a queer man are not diverse* (§ 5.3.3.1.1, p. 95).
- *Pressure to post and live one's best life* (§ 5.3.3.1.2, p. 96).
- *Feeling bad about oneself and engaging in negative self-comparison* (§ 5.3.3.1.3, p. 96).
- *Dating app experiences reinforce negative ideals* (§ 5.3.3.1.4, p. 99).
- *Trans experiences of lateral violence* (§ 5.3.3.1.5, p. 103).

5.3.3.1.1 Images of what it is to be a queer man are not diverse Most recounted how the pressure to conform to such “ideals” through exposure to idealised content online had led to negative self-comparison. Participants varied in how they described such “ideals” as seen by the community but generally they involved being white, cisgender, masculine and muscular. Some participants also saw this as extending to being in a relationship, having a high status job or living in a certain area. While many saw content online that they could relate to or that made them feel more comfortable in themselves ⁴⁸, much of what they saw could often reinforce the “toxic” culture participants described.

“a lot of stuff that does come up on social media that is queer related, is usually the sort of like, poster child of what the gay community is where it's... a muscled white man flexing, or in a relationship with someone who's like, basically... identical twins pretty much like that sort of image, it sort of negates the rest of the community, it's just sort of like, okay, this is what everyone should look like” [P4]

Similarly, while messages of inclusion are often espoused in the queer community, some participants noted how content that they see can negate this. P19 described his reactions to a t-shirt he saw posted on Instagram that said “It's okay to be gay. It's not okay to be ugly”:

“That was the other toxic thing that I was just like. I just, it's, again,

⁴⁶ See *Curating an attractive image* (§ 5.3.4, p. 107).

⁴⁷ See *Overcoming self-comparison* (§ 5.3.5.3, p. 141).

⁴⁸ See *Learning about and accepting one's identity* (§ 5.3.1.1, p. 76)

the hypocrisy. It's, you know, I think it's kind of like shoved down our throats that you know, queer people are so supportive and like, you know, and can be like so embracing of everyone in, like every community, we need to, like, you know, band together and then this kind of shit comes out" [P19]

Similarly, P20 described his frustration with seeing content that acknowledges issues with unrealistic body image ideals but continues to perpetuate it. As an example he talked about a TikTok he had seen with the voice over: "when you don't want to go to the gym, but then you realise that the gay community has unrealistic beauty standards so like you had to go to the gym".

5.3.3.1.2 Pressure to post and live one's best life Participants often described expectations around posting that they saw as driving the idealised content they saw. Many talked about Instagram as being a place where the norm is to post content heavily curated to present a "perfect" self or life ⁴⁹. For example, P10 described:

"And you have this toxic attitude where you have people within one community competing against another because they're trying to be in that superior position. They want to be desired they want to, like they want to be the most attractive or they want to be the most famous or the most obscenely dramatic and petty person on the planet, or the most. Yeah, just I think it's created a very competitive nature with the gay community." [P10]

As P21 saw it, those in the community who are chasing status by posting idealised content are often the people who set the norms around how to present and therefore increase the pressure on others. Similarly, P22 commented that there are more posts from those who set the unrealistic expectation to be "living your best life all the time" because average people have financial or time constraints that mean they do not have such content to post.

Some participants described ways that image editing or filtering could also contribute to idealised content.

"People pretend that that's their real life and it's a natural thing... they can Photoshop or use more subtle filters to create an unrealistic natural persona. I think that adds to the difficulties of being on [Instagram] because it feels like you're seeing all of these people and bodies and lifestyles that seem perfect. But they're presented in a way that's natural or relatable." [P5]

5.3.3.1.3 Feeling bad about oneself and engaging in negative self-comparison For most participants, being presented with content that idolises

⁴⁹ For discussion of how participants engaged in this culture through their own posts, see *Performing an idealised self* (§ 5.3.4.1, p. 108).



Figure 5.14: An Honest Social Platform Ad P8 created for Instagram.

only one kind of queer man led to negative self-comparison. Often, participants described difficulties with their body image as a result. For example, P8 created an Honest Platform Ad for Instagram that sold its ability to “ruin your mental health in three easy steps” as a result of social comparison (see Figure 5.14). Similarly, P16 described the impact self-comparison have:

“I’ve noticed that a lot of people I’ve talked to about Instagram feel quite similarly about that where you see these images of men with really perfect bodies and that can be quite damaging for a lot of people. I think I go through periods of admiring and appreciating and then also, sometimes feeling like well, why don’t I look like that and will I ever look like that? Is there any way I can make myself look like that and is there something wrong with me et cetera?” [P16]

Some participants talked about their fitness journeys and how this affected their relationship with idealised content online. While for some participants, working out or becoming more active helped them develop perspective and overcome negative self-comparison ⁵⁰, it could also exacerbate the issue as it did for P23:

“I think that it has been more so since I’ve gotten fit, like those issues have not gone away. All those thoughts have not gone away. If anything, they’ve intensified. And I look back on my past self at like my previous weights. And I look at that person quite negatively. Because I thought of myself, I think that I was being quite ignorant about my health and

⁵⁰ See *Maintaining perspective* (§ 5.3.5.3.3, p. 142) for discussion of this.

what I was eating.” [P23]

For a number of participants, negative self-comparison to others they saw online made them reluctant to post images of themselves. For example, P24 described that he rarely posts pictures of himself because he often feels uncomfortable with the way he looks.

While having an ideal physique could be something participants aspired to, negative self-comparison extended beyond physical appearance for a number of them. As P14 described:

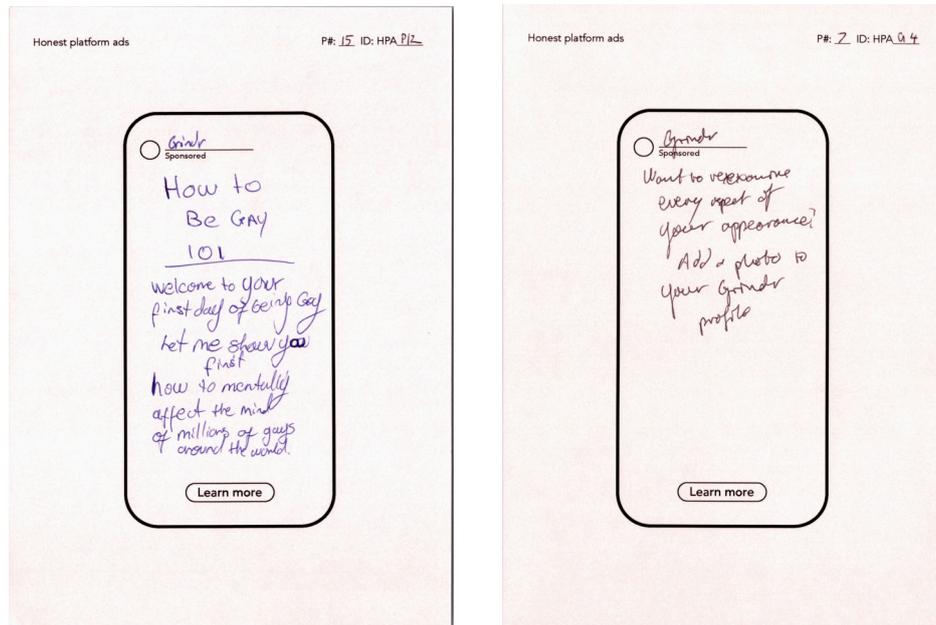
“There’s the whole during your 20s, you should be well built, like you live at the gym, but you’ve also got a professional career sort of thing going on. And when you see that on a day to day basis, I think that that can be quite challenging to overcome, of comparing yourself and going, Oh, I’m not, I’m not the proper gay man, or whatever, because that’s what I see on these apps, as well” [P14]

For many participants, seeing people living their “best-lives” could be a trigger for self-comparison. For example, P1 said that Instagram “tends to make you unhappy” because the experience of using it is to be “constantly bombarded with all these perfect snapshots”. Some participants described how content they saw online about people on similar journeys but further ahead could be both aspirational and challenging. P4 described how seeing people on TikTok achieve goals he has set for himself, for example being in a relationship, when he is “not there yet” could make him feel bad about himself. For P11, much of the self-comparison he described related to his gender transition:

“A large part of comparison for me would be comparison to other people’s transition timelines and the effects they’ve had. And you know, how old they were when they started [testosterone] or how old they were when they got surgery. Before I’d started [testosterone] when I was younger, probably 14, 15, 16, it was something that I was looking at, and researching around probably every day, if not every second day, because I wanted that experience so badly. That was really consuming. And so to try and feel closer to it, I would seek out that content. And basically just fixate on it.” [P11]

While he commented that such self-comparison has lessened now that he “passes” more easily as a man since starting to medically transition, it has not entirely stopped. However, he described that it is still important to “see how [he] measures up”:

“I’m five, four [tall]. So there’s still a fair amount of effort that goes on there [to pass]... it was quite important to me, before I was passing as much and now it’s, it’s still important to see how I measure up, I guess, to cis people to cis guys my age, because they’re all like six foot a zillion



(a) P15's Honest Platform Ad.

(b) P7's Honest Platform Ad.

Figure 5.15: The Honest Platform Ads P15 and P7 created for Grindr.

and have [unclear] and I'm trying to just try to grow my two my two little stubble hairs." [P11]

5.3.3.1.4 Dating app experiences reinforce negative ideals For multiple participants, dating apps provided a first foray into interacting with other queer men. While such apps offered a way for participants to find community and connect with peers⁵¹, they could also contribute to feeling the need to conform. For example, P20 shared:

"You have apps like, you know, Grindr, Tinder, Hinge and you get kind of that's how you put your feet into the dating world. Or that's how you begin to understand what other fellow you know people in the community look for in a partner or whatnot. And from when I first began, I you know, like, for a split second, I was kinda like sucked into that culture of like, 'oh, you need to, you know, like, you can't be too feminine'. 'Oh, you're too, like, you know, you're not like masc enough'." [P20]

Similarly, P15 created an Honest Social Platform ad for Grindr that he labelled as "How to be gay 101" (see Figure 5.15). As he described, the profiles he saw on the app gave him a very narrow view of how to be a queer man:

"It's just all of the shirtless men, and it's a crazy standard for someone that just started using the app... It's just like, 'oh, is this what I'm supposed to - is this what being gay looks like? It's having that body?'"

⁵¹ See *Using dating apps as a way to find peers* (§ 5.3.6.1.4, p. 149).



Figure 5.16: An Honest Social Platform Ad P5 created for Grindr.

[P15]

Many participants highlighted the focus on physical appearance when using apps such as Grindr and Tinder, and the impact it had on them. For example, P7 on an Honest Social Platforms card he created for Grindr wrote, “Want to reexamine every aspect of your appearance? Add a photo to your Grindr Profile” (see Figure 5.15). Similarly, P5 created an Honest Social Platform card about body image standards on Grindr asking, “if you don’t look like this, what are you doing here?” (see Figure 5.16). On Grindr, the statistics and categories that profiles include could also contribute ⁵², as P5 commented:

“[On Grindr,] everything’s tagged and put into labels and categories. You’ll know how much someone weighs and how tall someone is, what they identify as.” [P5]

Many described how people on dating apps could be discriminatory to those who do not conform to the dominant idea of what a queer man ought to be. This could both be on profiles, where their bio text could be discriminatory, or in direct interactions. In terms of profiles, many described how they often contain lists of attributes someone discriminates against. For example, P7 described he has often seen profiles with “the classic like, no fats, no fems, no Asians or whatever, or just being like, super specific, kind of I’m only into someone that is like six foot or taller and has like broad shoulders and is under 70 kilos”. Similarly, P22 commented that he has often seen biphobic profiles. While some described the negative impact this

⁵² For more discussion of how participants perceived each dating app, see *Using a spectrum of dating apps* (§ 5.3.6.2, p. 151).

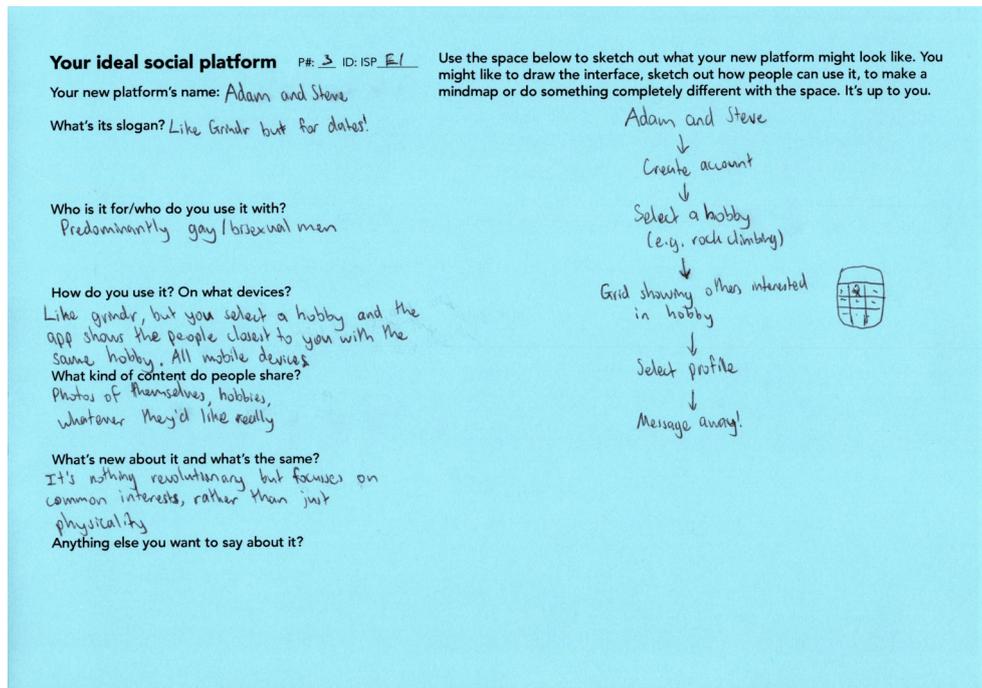


Figure 5.17: The Ideal Social Platform envisioned by P3.

could have on them, others were resigned to it and expressed needing to have a thick skin because it was to be expected. Most participants who identified as People of Colour described experiencing racism in their interactions with others, particularly on Grindr. For example, P18 described:

“For a country that likes to think of itself as very diverse multiculturally, gay [city name] is not always the biggest fan of queer Asians... [people ask] ‘can I see a face pic?’ you send them a face pic of you, and then they ‘go oh Asians are not for me’. You could have said that in about twenty other ways that would have been nicer, a little more classy, a little more decent, for lack of a better word... but somehow some people just decide to go down that route and go with the nuclear option” [P18]

Participants also described harassment based on their body weight or other aspects of their physical appearance. For example, P6 described people harassing him for being “fat” while P16 has had people telling him to “eat something” because they thought he was too skinny. Beyond his weight, P16 also described how people had felt entitled to message him criticising his choice of outfits or his decision to shave his body hair.

Describing his frustrations with how appearance-centred dating apps are, P3 envisioned a social platform that instead emphasised connecting people based on shared interests (see Figure 5.17). He hoped that by reversing the script of first interacting based on physical appearance, then determining compatibility, interactions could be made nicer. Similarly, both P1 and P5 envisioned Ideal Social Platforms that would be similar to dating apps but for friendship. P1 described that

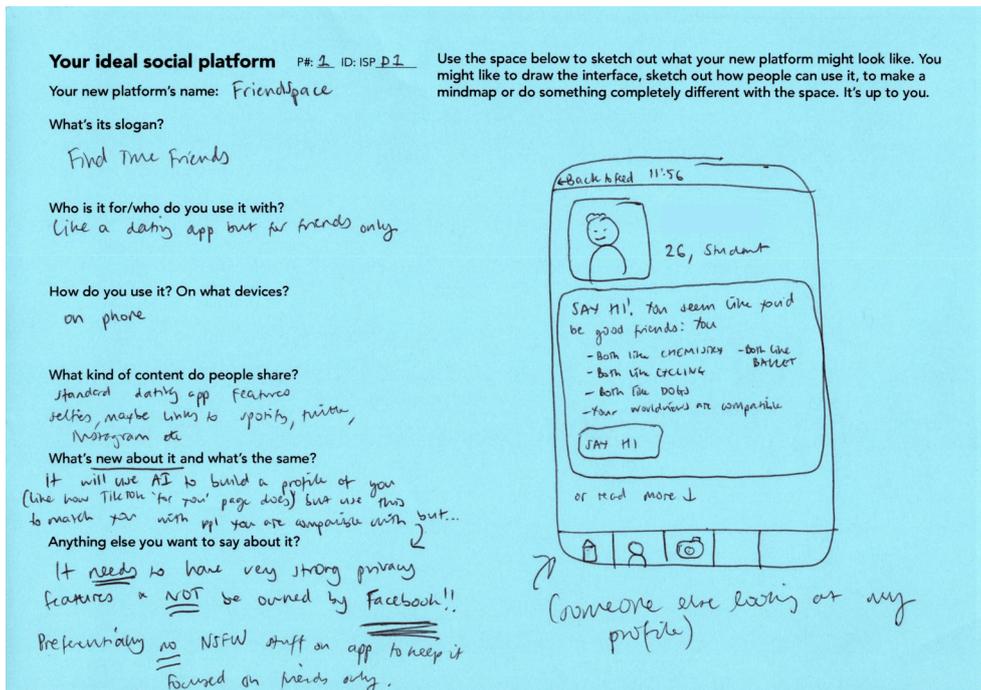


Figure 5.18: The Ideal Social Platform envisioned by P1.

people would be matched based on shared interests (see Figure 5.18) while P5 shared that it would not solely be “pic/vid” based (see Figure 5.19). We discuss these concepts further as part of later discussions relating to how participants used dating apps to make friends⁵³. As we discuss elsewhere, however, mismatched expectations with others on dating apps could lead to negative experiences⁵⁴.

Being ghosted or blocked could exacerbate participants’ anxieties or self-comparison. As some described, people could be quick to block them, or simply not respond, if they did not fit what they were looking for. For example, P18 described that his experiences being ignored or blocked on Grindr have made him feel that “people don’t want to be associated with somebody who is not, you know, slim, taut and, you know, as close to perfect, as you will find”. Similarly, P11 described how some people stopped replying to him on Grindr after disclosing that he was trans, as we discuss in the following section. Platform features could also play into participants’ feelings of rejection. For example, P12 described the negative impact of Grindr showing him when someone has viewed his profile:

“I’m confident in my looks but just like the people who like, leave you on a read or like... oh this person looked at my profile and didn’t message me. Am I not good enough? Is there something wrong with me? That kind of thought process goes through your head.” [P12]

Similarly, P5 described how he has used Grindr while out with friends and how

⁵³ See *Using dating apps as a way to find peers* (§ 5.3.6.1.4, p. 149)

⁵⁴ See *Navigating mismatched expectations on dating apps and issues around consent* (§ 5.3.6.4, p. 158)

Your ideal social platform PR. 5 ID: ISP FL Use the space below to sketch out what your new platform might look like. You might like to draw the interface, sketch out how people can use it, to make a mindmap or do something completely different with the space. It's up to you.

Your new platform's name: PAL

What's its slogan? Why can't we be friends?

Who is it for/who do you use it with? This platform is for making and interacting with friends, marketed towards primarily queer people

How do you use it? On what devices? Mostly app driven but does have a desktop version, it combines the match system used in tinder/bumble with the messaging, feed, FVP, and profile creation like Instagram

What kind of content do people share? Similar content to Instagram but not focused on selling items or brands, looser censorship so queer expression isn't unfairly targeted, a lot of life update sharing Not solely pic/vid but text posts like twitter

What's new about it and what's the same? The focus is on creating and sustaining friendships, there aren't many platonic ways to make friends for queer people and it's really isolating. There would be stronger preferences settings and security

Anything else you want to say about it? Features to keep people safe and also to have a more targeted experience

Figure 5.19: The Ideal Social Platform envisioned by P5.

seeing them receive more messages than him has lead him to wonder “what’s wrong with me that I’m not getting the same level of attention?”. This has lead him, along with others, to try to optimise his dating app profiles to garner more attention, as we discuss later ⁵⁵.

A number of participants saw the anonymity afforded by Grindr profiles as allowing people to be more discriminatory and less accepting. Combined with the a culture that only values certain types of queer men, participants shared many stories of negative interactions on the app ⁵⁶. Some contrasted this with Tinder where it is more common for profiles to have face pictures. As P18 described:

“Coming out was damn hard enough. Then you need to find a partner that fits you, and to come into contact with people who don’t want to accept you, for you, whatever stage that you’re at. Drives me ballistic. I can’t I can’t change my skin color. I can’t change my race. I can’t change the fact that I have an extremely obnoxious laugh or whatever. But the fact that people just shut that down I think is really interesting. So yeah, harassment is one thing. But yeah, I think harassment to me has come from a lot of anonymous parties.” [P18]

5.3.3.1.5 Trans experiences of lateral violence Being trans could add additional pressures to conform or result in harassment, from both cis and trans people. P11 and P22 both talked about including being trans on dating app profiles

⁵⁵ See *Optimising dating app profiles* (§ 5.3.4.3.1, p. 124).

⁵⁶ See *Navigating mismatched expectations on dating apps and issues around consent* (§ 5.3.6.4, p. 158) for more discussion of the negative experiences participants described on dating apps.

and how this impacted their experiences. P11 chose to disclose he was trans on his Grindr profile during the brief period he used the app highlighting his perception of it as a hookup app and that it would be important that anyone he might hookup with knew. However, he commented that many people do not read bios on dating apps and that he usually discloses being trans during conversations with new connections. While P11 described that responses to his disclosure were often positive, he did emphasise that many people would immediately stop talking to him upon realising he was trans. For P22, disclosing being trans on dating app profiles often lead to harassment and as a result, he avoids dating apps entirely. As P22 described, he often received unwanted attention from people he described as “chasers” who fetishise trans people.

“with dating apps, especially if you openly identify as trans, it’s either like, outright transphobia or fetishism. There’s like no real in between sometimes. Because like, I feel like on Grindr, mainly people are more like transphobic. Or they just like, try and be really fetishy...” [P22]

P11 also described lateral violence within the trans community where fights about the validity of people’s experiences could occur. He described witnessing people in online communities “bashing” other people for the way they presented or for not conforming to the narrative of being trans that some expected. He also shared his own experiences of being questioned over the ways he has chosen to present.

“So I’ve found that sometimes when I’m presenting more femininely, I occasionally do get questions being like, if you’re trans and you have all this dysphoria, and you hate being perceived as a girl, why are you why are you wearing makeup? Or why are you painting your nails or why are you wearing so many earrings? Surely you don’t need that many because I’ve got quite a lot. But, um, so there is a little bit of a, if you’re trans, why are you doing X?” [P11]

Discussed in *Receiving unsolicited NSFW content and being pressured to sext* (§ 5.3.6.4.2, p. 160) is another form of harassment described by many, receiving unsolicited sexual content or advances on dating apps.

5.3.3.2 Engaging with idealised presentations

Participants often held seemingly contradictory thoughts about the idealised content they saw on social platforms. In this theme we describe the ways participants engaged with content, even if they thought it could have negative impacts. We do this across two sub-themes:

- *“Toxic” content can be engaging* (§ 5.3.3.2.1, p. 104).
- *Algorithmic presentation of idealised content* (§ 5.3.3.2.2, p. 106).

5.3.3.2.1 “Toxic” content can be engaging While participants were quick to point out the ways that such content could make them feel bad about themselves,

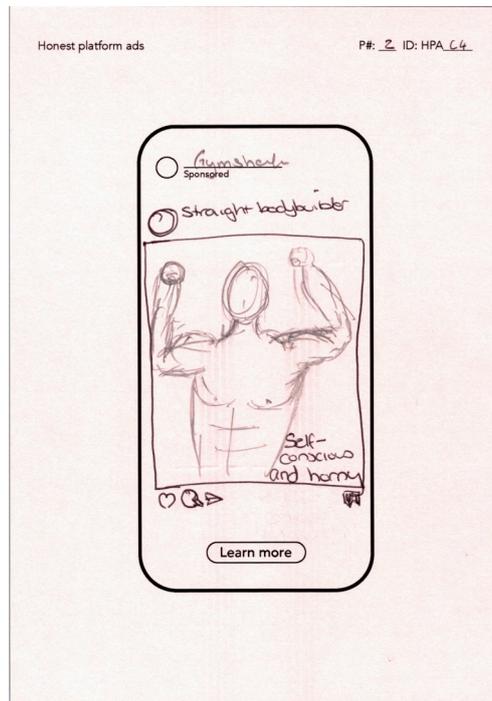


Figure 5.20: One of the Honest Social Platform Ads that P2 drew for Instagram.

they also often described wanting to see it. For example, P18 described how the “proliferation of needing to be some kind of Adonis” could be damaging to mental health. When asked if he has tried to change the way he uses Instagram to avoid seeing such content he replied:

“You know, it’s funny, I’m gonna sound like a hypocrite, but I actually encourage it. Look, the algorithm has a funny way of feeding you exactly what you didn’t think you wanted. But you so do. So the answer to that question is I don’t because I actually encourage it.” [P18]

P22 shared a similar sentiment shortly after describing how the content he sees on Instagram, particularly from the celebrities he follows, sets unrealistic expectations to be living one’s “best-life” all the time. When asked why he follows them he explained:

“I don’t know. It’s just the aesthetics behind people. I just, like enjoy people watching. So it’s just like, kind of, it’s kind of fun to just like, see them. But like, you know...” [P22]

Following accounts that post idealised content could also be for practical reasons. P2 described how he follows “fitfluencers” on Instagram and TikTok to get fitness advice even if this can often lead to negative self-comparison. As an Honest Social Platform Ad, he drew a bodybuilder and added a caption “self-conscious and horny” (see Figure 5.20). He explained in the second interview:

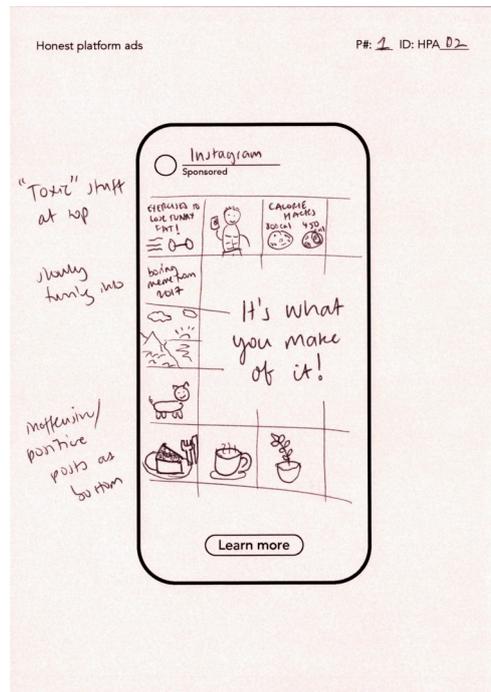


Figure 5.21: An Honest Social Platform Ad that P1 drew for Instagram showing the Explore page.

“I had hand surgery. So wasn’t able to go to the gym, and this year kind of has been a bit of a flop. So I haven’t been at my best all year. So I haven’t been able to actually get a good body. So a bit self-conscious about that. And yeah, horny, because, you know, they’re good looking boys, very good looking fitfluencers, I guess... And they look perfect all year round.” [P2]

Reinforcing participants descriptions of idealised content as engaging, some participants who described cleansing their feeds from things that might be triggering⁵⁷ said that it made the apps boring to use. As we discuss in the next sub-theme, participants saw this ability for idealised content to be engaging as something that gets exploited by social platform algorithms.

5.3.3.2.2 Algorithmic presentation of idealised content Some participants linked the appeal of idealised content to algorithmic content suggestion features recommending it. For example, participants often mentioned the Instagram Explore page, which presents suggested content, as source of “toxic” content. P1 drew an Honest Social Platform Ad depicting this which shows the different kind of content that appears in his explore page (see Figure 5.21). Others described similar content, saying their Explore page was often filled with shirtless pictures of attractive men and linking this to negative self-comparison. Interacting with such content could also exacerbate the issue. As both P4 and P18 described, this often lead to being

⁵⁷ As we discuss in *Avoiding content that could be triggering* (§ 5.3.5.3.2, p. 142)

presented with more.

“Whenever I go on like the Explore page to like, just see like one or two things, I’ll get like, you know, an entire feed worth of like, you know, imagery that I don’t want to see or people I don’t want to see or stuff that makes me want to compare myself or people who I want to compare myself to... and it’s kind of hard to filter that out. Because it’s like, if you interact with one post, then you might get hundreds of them constantly.” [P4]

Some participants pointed out the ways that the algorithms on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok encourage people to post idealised content. For example, P20 commented that much of the short-form video content he sees starts with a quick flash of the creator shirtless, “a very quick bait to catch your eyes that’s catered towards a queer audience”. P23 saw this kind of content as especially harmful because, although he has become increasingly desensitised to content that is explicit about showing off the creators physique, it’s more subtle and pervasive.

“There’s one specific type of content that’s like, very unhelpful, and then just when it’s like more like, subversive, like, it’s not the point of the video, there’s like, yeah, this type of content, it’s like, OOTD, like outfit of the day videos that men will make. And they make a point of starting the video, like in their underwear. So like, you see their body and you see like, the bulge, whatever. It’s like that inadvertent or, you know, it’s on purpose. But it’s not like the purpose of the video and it’s the first thing you see” [P23]

However, even if participants lamented the negative effects of such content, many described how they created highly curated presentations themselves, as we discuss in the next overarching theme.

5.3.4 Curating an attractive image

Participants overwhelmingly described the negative sides of idealised content on social platforms, as we discussed in the previous overarching theme. However, as we now describe, this did not stop many from striving to curate an attractive image of themselves. Participants painted a complex picture of how they did this to seek approval, validation and status. We describe this across three themes:

- *Performing an idealised self* (§ 5.3.4.1, p. 108).
- *Posting thirst traps and other NSFW content* (§ 5.3.4.2, p. 113).
- *Curating dating app profiles* (§ 5.3.4.3, p. 124).

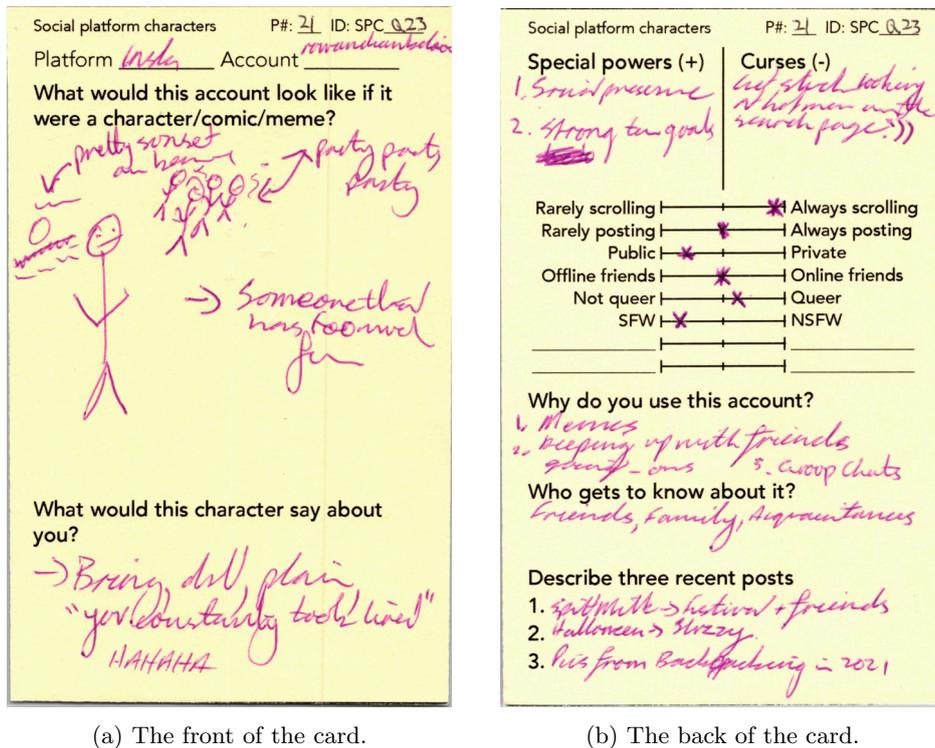


Figure 5.22: The Social Platform Character card P21 created for Instagram.

5.3.4.1 Performing an idealised self

As we described above⁵⁸, participants felt great pressure to present themselves in ways that aligned with dominant norms for queer men. While that theme focused on the content that participants saw on social platforms, here we focus on their experiences and motivations for posting such content themselves. We do this across four sub-themes:

- *Only posting positive or the best things* (§ 5.3.4.1.1, p. 108).
- *Distinction between posts and stories* (§ 5.3.4.1.2, p. 109).
- *Curating idealised content for oneself* (§ 5.3.4.1.3, p. 111).
- *Self-censoring to avoid saying the wrong thing* (§ 5.3.4.1.4, p. 112).

5.3.4.1.1 Only posting positive or the best things Many participants described how they curated their social platform posts to present only the highlights of their experiences. Some described that this was the expectation of how to use the platforms⁵⁹. For example, P1 shared that he feels Instagram is designed to encourage people to make it seem like they have their life in order. Similarly, P21 that he did not want to share anything “dull”. Describing the social platform character card he created for his Instagram account (see Figure 5.22), he said:

“So Instagram, what would this account look like for a character? Oh,

⁵⁸ See *The need to conform to the image of an ideal queer man* (§ 5.3.3.1, p. 95).

⁵⁹ See *Images of what it is to be a queer man are not diverse* (§ 5.3.3.1.1, p. 95) where we discuss this in more detail

yeah. Everything looks very nice. It's a nice life. sunsets, parties, lots of friends. Someone that has too much fun. Yeah. So while this character say about me, he'd probably think I'm boring, dull and plain, because his life is so much nicer than my reality." [P21]

Even if platforms and their cultures encourage less curated posts, this did not necessarily stop participants from trying to present an attractive image. For example, P24 shared that he still tries to present his best-self on BeReal, a platform whose design and marketing encourages people to post more "real" moments. Although he was conflicted about going against the idea of the app, he described doing so because he is self-conscious about his appearance. However, putting too much effort into doing so could draw the ire of others. For example, P21 shared that friends have messaged to "shame" him for posting moments that were too curated on BeReal. In doing so, they highlighted to him that BeReal exposes how many times the photo was retaken before posting. Conversely, P23 described increasing acceptance within his friend group of more constructed posts on the platform. He saw this as taking away the unique value of the platform and thought that he and his friends would soon stop using the app.

5.3.4.1.2 Distinction between posts and stories Instagram offers people two different formats for sharing: posts and stories. While posts appear on one's profile and in the main feed, stories appear in a dedicated feed at the top of the interface and are only visible for 24 hours. Due to these differences, many participants described how they approached curation for each format in distinct ways. Given the comparative permanence of posts, participants often described only using them for more highly curated content – things that they want to become part of their profile. For example, P16 talked about saving posts for special occasions such as "Mardi Gras, or I'm going on this trip to Melbourne, or I just got my hair dyed or something – something like that's particularly special".

For some participants, this means that posts have to fit a certain aesthetic. For example, P23 described at length that there is a specific visual language for Instagram photo dumps⁶⁰. Similarly, P5 described how he takes great consideration of "what would actually do well" when posting to Instagram. While many participants complained about how idealised or curated content on platforms such as Instagram could be, others, like P23, appreciated the art to it.

"I actually quite enjoy the like, the, like, technical production elements of a good Instagram post, like I really appreciate when someone puts effort into like an Instagram dump. Like, for quality of like, posting a bunch of things from your daily life that ends up looking like really aspirational actually find that like a really interesting and compelling exhibition of like, mundane life... so it's something that I like subscribe

⁶⁰ A "dump" describes a post that includes a series of images from a specific time period or event all shared together. For example, P19 describes a "November dump" where you "put up a bunch of photos that you've taken throughout the month, where like, that feels more curated. And it's like a nice little album, for yourself to like, share with others".

to. And it's a language that I try to replicate in my own posts in a manner that feels that still feels authentic. But, um, it's kind of like you get a brief for an assignment. And I like trying to pick and choose or even produce content that fits that brief. Um, because I actually find a lot of it like visually or aesthetically pleasing." [P23]

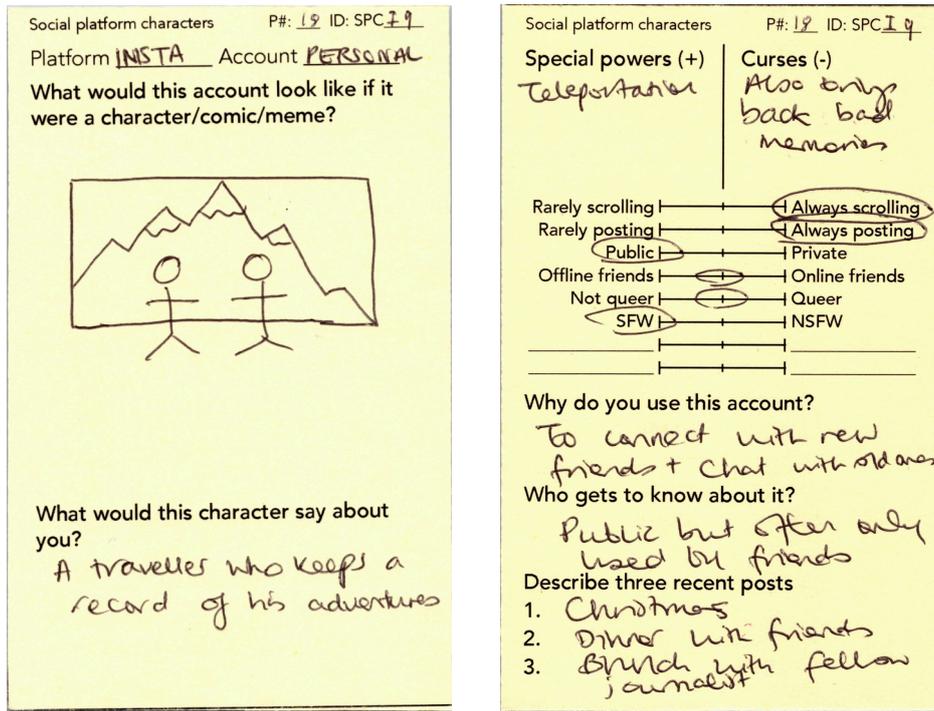
Conversely, a number of participants described how they use stories for sharing less curated, more in the moment or quotidian events. For example, P19 described that for him "a story is kind of like, either take a photo in the moment and post it or, like, upload something that you've taken more recently in the day" whereas posts are reserved for dumps. Some participants described how their stories usually showcased what they were doing or seeing – images or videos that captured their perspective. For example, P2 talked about sharing stories of him cooking or the cats in his neighbourhood and P1 described taking photos of the views he saw on his bike rides. This contrasts posts which for many participants were more likely to be of themselves, as P23 described:

"I would say that there's a lot more persona, on my stories, actually, you know what, maybe the story's are more introspective? I don't know. Because maybe the story is like, I would say it's like about my interests and stuff, and it's about my friends. But it's not really ever a photo of me. Or, like, about me, it's always about the world, like, around me, my environment around me. Whereas like, my posts are about me." [P23]

Although stories are only visible for 24 hours after posting on Instagram and Snapchat by default, both platforms support presenting a curated selection on one's profile. Instagram calls this feature "highlights" and some participants talked about using it. For P1, the curated highlights on his profile provide a way for new people to get to know him. Alternatively, story highlights could be seen as part of having a complete profile on Instagram. For example, P21 described setting up the feature after someone told him that he needed them, and that he continues to update them because "everyone else does". Highlights could also be used for personal reminiscing as we discuss in the following sub-theme.

The differing model for responses to interactions between posts and stories could also shape the way the people used them. Whereas posts afford public responses, either by liking or adding a comment, responses to stories are private and visible only to the poster. For P19, he sees this as making stories much more personal, and indeed, a number of participants described responding to stories as a good way to spark conversations with friends.

"With [stories], you can add six reactions. Or you can send a message, I guess, more personal as well, because it's a message not a comment that everyone else can see. I'm not afraid to like, make a comment on someone's post. But I guess subconsciously, I know like, if I'm going to say something that they don't want all of their friends and followers to



(a) The front of the card. (b) The back of the card.
 Figure 5.23: The Social Platform Character card P18 created for Instagram.

see, I’m probably not going to make that comment. I’ll just message them personally.” [P19]

However, this does not mean that stories can not also be used to curate a particular image as P5 lamented:

“I think a lot of people – I would say more than half of the people that use Instagram Stories, it’s about sharing your lifestyle to seem a certain way or present your life as something better than it is. I know people that will go out and need to at least get one picture or one video, wherever they go to present that image of – whether it’s wealth or social capital. I think that has changed the nature of even just going out and being social and seeing people. It becomes a little bit more performative. But yeah, I would say that’s Instagram’s problem. It’s that presenting of real life but it’s not real life. It’s a crafted persona or reality.” [P5]

5.3.4.1.3 Curating idealised content for oneself While posting curated content to present an idealised life may generally be considered for other people’s consumption, some participants shared how they might also do this for themselves. For example, P18 wrote that he was “a traveller who keeps a record of his adventures” on a Social platform Characters card for his Instagram account (see Figure 5.23). Explaining what he meant he said:

“That’s pretty much what I do. It is a record of my adventures. It’s a

record of people who are it's a record of people who I love and who I cherish and I share time with together and those kinds of things. And pre pandemic, especially. It was where all of my travel pictures lived... It's a record for me, just to remind myself of where I've been, which is weird, because I collect stuff anyway. Like tangible things. But yeah, it's just a place for digital memories." [P18]

Similarly, some participants described looking back at their posts to remind them of good moments. For example, P19 described how looking back at his social media posts, even if he feels they show a skewed perspective, can bring back positive emotions and make him feel good about himself. Both P1 and P23 talked about using their Instagram story highlights for this purpose too.

"I like the idea of looking back on [Instagram story highlights]. I don't even necessarily expect people to look at them. But I like to look back on them myself. Because I feel like they're kind of like a photo album that you don't even realise you're compiling until it's done. Yeah, and they're kind of like, the smaller moments rather than like it's like how I've seen it, because I think like that my main feed my grid is, like how other people see me. And then like, my story reel is like how I've seen the world or how I've seen these events and how I've seen my friends throughout the year." [P23]

Posting moments others might see as showing an idealised life could also be something to project for oneself. For example, P7 described how posting only the better moments, being by the pool or swimming in his case, could be a form of escapism.

"By only posting photos that are like, out and about swimming, I kind of can feel like that is the life I'm leading rather than being trapped in the last five months of trying to do a PhD."

5.3.4.1.4 Self-censoring to avoid saying the wrong thing Beyond seeking to curate idealised presentations of their physical appearance and lifestyle, some participants shared how this extended to political content as well. While this could be to avoid harassment from those outside the queer community ⁶¹, some participants shared how they were reluctant to post content they thought they might receive backlash on from within the community. Most often this was to do with political content and worries about cancel culture. For example, P16 was very concerned about saying the wrong thing when discussing political issues and described losing friends in the past due to this.

"There are also times, I think, you know, when there is specific political moments like the Black Lives Matter movement, or like, I think there was something else that I just can't quite remember. But there's just a

⁶¹ See *Concealing being queer or trans to avoid negative experiences* (§ 5.3.2.1, p. 89).

lot of those things where everyone starts posting on social media and I worry about saying the wrong thing or doing something wrong and just being judged or cancelled or whatever over it.” [P16]

Concerns about the content of posts could also extend to those made in the past. For example, P13 removed all his posts from Instagram because he saw them as a vulnerability. He talked about how he is constantly learning and evolving in contrast to his old posts which presented him in specific moments and could be used against him. Similarly, P6 described how he regularly clears his post history across his accounts out of fear that someone may attack him for something he has posted in the past. He said that he does this manually every three months, lamenting that none of the platforms he uses allow for automatic post deletion. This kind of retroactive curation could also be to reflect changing norms or a desire to keep profiles as an up to date reflection of oneself. For example, P7 shared that:

“I recently archived a bunch of photos on Instagram, but that was just I was bored. And was like, like, I was like, why the fuck would I post that? It’s such a stupid photo. It’s such a stupid caption. Like, you know, way back when Instagram first started, and everyone was like, posting like, every tiny little thing. And all the filters were super like basic. Yeah. Like, nobody needs to see that anymore.” [P7]

Participants’ work could also cause them to self-censor as a result of the extent to which their social platform accounts were entwined with their professional lives. Most often such participants described not being able to express political opinions or leanings. For example, a journalist who is very active on Twitter for work described how he needs to stay impartial in what he posts. Similarly, someone who worked in the entertainment industry where his Facebook and Instagram accounts are often used for work as well as in his personal life talked about not posting anything controversial that could upset future employers.

“I know that these things – anything you post on the internet is going to be there forever, sometimes. So I think people who don’t have any sort of ambition to have a public career can just post without that fear or that anxiety of what are the consequences of this? All that sort of stuff.” [P5]

As we discuss in the following theme, sharing NSFW content or thirst traps was another way some participants tried to curate an attractive image. For a number of participants, similar considerations to the ones we describe in this sub-theme also applied.

5.3.4.2 Posting thirst traps and other NSFW content

In this theme, we describe how participants used social platforms to post thirst traps and other NSFW content. We do this across five sub-themes:

- *Maintaining privacy and safety* (§ 5.3.4.2.1, p. 114).



Figure 5.24: An Honest Platform Ad created by P5 expressing his concern about posting NSFW content publicly on Twitter.

- *Using main accounts to post thirst traps and NSFW content* (§ 5.3.4.2.2, p. 116).
- *Posting on NSFW alt accounts to get validation* (§ 5.3.4.2.3, p. 119).
- *Monetising posting NSFW content* (§ 5.3.4.2.4, p. 122).
- *Navigating consent when sharing NSFW content* (§ 5.3.4.2.5, p. 123).

5.3.4.2.1 Maintaining privacy and safety Participants expressed varying levels of concern over privacy when it came to sharing NSFW images of themselves. Some, such as P5 who wanted to have a public facing career, were very concerned about the potential negative consequences of having shared NSFW content (see Figure 5.24, which shows an Honest Platform Ad he created). He felt much more comfortable sharing explicit images on Snapchat, where pictures sent are more ephemeral due to the platform’s design. Similarly, P16 was concerned about creating an OnlyFans⁶² while working in education and only did so after leaving that job. On the other hand, even if he did not feel comfortable participating himself, P5 felt that sharing NSFW content publicly was becoming much more socially acceptable. As an example, he shared that many OnlyFans creators had become influencers that get paid for promoting brands, something he thought would have been unthinkable in the past. More directly, he observed that people on Instagram seem increasingly okay with publicly following such creators. Similarly, P19 expressed that, while he is unsure of whether there will be future negative consequences to posting NSFW

⁶² See *Monetising posting NSFW content* (§ 5.3.4.2.4, p. 122).

content publicly, so many other people do similar that he is not too worried.

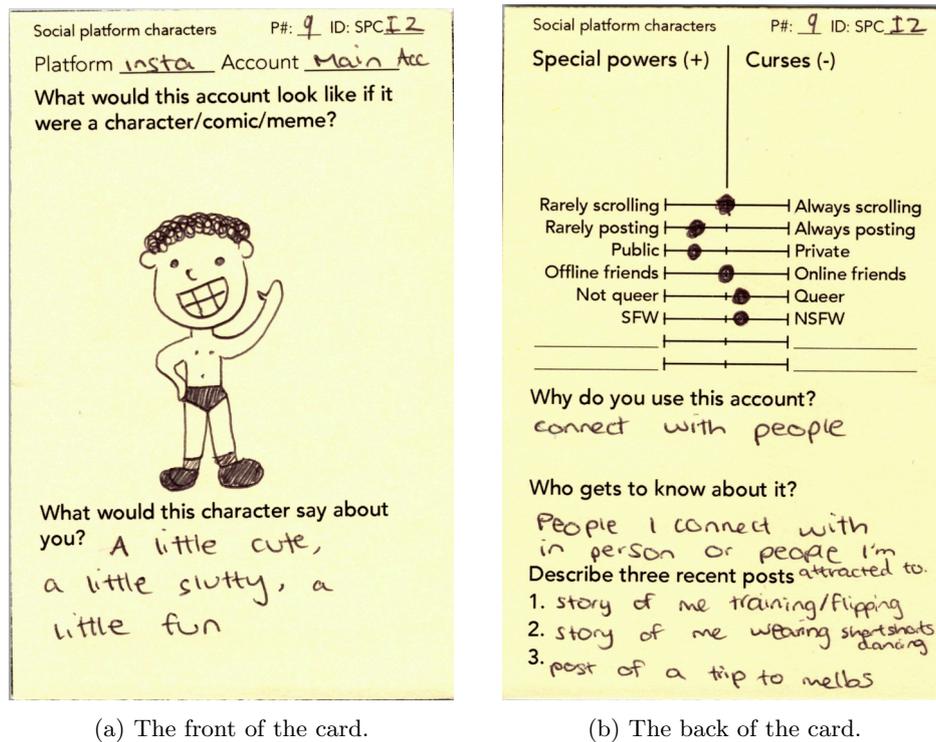
Those who posted explicit content described keeping it separate from their other presentations, often by using alt accounts. Twitter was the main place participants had NSFW alt accounts, although P17 and P19 also had them on Instagram and P17 and P23 used separate Snapchat accounts to interact with those they met online. Both P17 and P19 talked about creating a consistent brand or persona for themselves across their NSFW accounts. Often, these alt accounts were pseudonymous to protect participants' privacy and some, such as P16, chose to not include their face in any public posts they made. Similarly, P23 described:

“I always had a burner Snapchat like, and I think that a lot of gay men who partook in this like culture of exchanging nudes have burner Snapchats where they can like partake in like, sexual activity without it being connected” [P23]

Participants varied in how open they were about their NSFW accounts with their existing connections. Some described how it was common to have friends with whom they had sexual interactions and shared their NSFW accounts. Similarly, P11 shared how he and his boyfriend both have NSFW alt Twitter accounts and how he enjoys that they can “exist in a NSFW space with or separately from each other”. Others told their friends about such accounts but did not want their friends to see them. Decisions about who participants wanted as part of the audience that could see their NSFW content were not always static. For example, P19 described removing people who had followed his Instagram alt account as he started posting increasingly NSFW content that he did not think they would appreciate. A number of participants also described posting about their alt accounts as we describe in *Navigating consent when sharing NSFW content* (§ 5.3.4.2.5, p. 123). If accounts were shared, it was not always with people participants had a sexual relationship with.

“Yes, I have a lot of kind of connections like friendship connections, like on my not safe work accounts that aren't sexual at all, but just like, very, like supportive friendships” [P19]

Despite participants' efforts to keep accounts private or anonymous, there could be barriers to doing so. As P18 shared, part of his reason for not posting on his NSFW alt Twitter account was that, “you don't know who will run into it... This is what I've learned about alt Twitter, people have an amazing way of working out who you are”. Similarly, while some participants chose to create NSFW alt accounts to keep the content they posted there away from the audiences of their main accounts, platform affordances could get in the way of this. For example, a number of participants spoke about how Instagram suggests accounts accounts to follow and, as a result, may suggest their alt account to people they did not want to know about it. At first, P19 did not consider this happening but he described how being unexpectedly followed by someone he knew caused him to start blocking certain



(a) The front of the card.

(b) The back of the card.

Figure 5.25: The Social Platform Character card P9 created for his main Instagram account.

people whom he did not want to see the account.

“I think when I first opened [my Instagram NSFW alt account] up years ago, my manager somehow ended up following the account. So that was like the epiphany moment I was like, oh shit, I need to I have control over like who sees this account... And yeah, because you don’t realise you know, when you’re scrolling and you’ll have things like pop up like suggested follow like just follow this account and I’m like, I didn’t consider this would be popping up on people I know on their suggested, I’m like yeah shit, I need to constrict that.” [P19]

5.3.4.2.2 Using main accounts to post thirst traps and NSFW content

While a number of participants talked about sharing NSFW content on alt accounts, some described sharing thirst traps or other NSFW content to audiences on their main accounts. For example, P9 saw the brand he presented on his main Instagram account as “a little cute, a little slutty, a little fun” (see Figure 5.25). Describing why he presents this image, he shared that he feels “the gay scene, they really respect nudity and sexualised things”.

An advantage to posting thirst traps or NSFW content on main accounts compared to on alt accounts was that participants could share content with their existing audiences. For example, P16 described being able to share content that is more intimate or personally revealing on his Snapchat story compared to his alt Twitter

account because he knows the audience. Posting something in the hopes someone might see it, and checking to see if they had, was a common experience among a number of participants. For example, P21 described that he might post a thirst trap on his main Instagram story if he wants attention from a specific person who is following him, and that he noticed an increase in doing so since becoming single. When asked why he shares chooses to share thirst traps on his Instagram story, P21 responded:

P21: “Oh, attention (laughs) I guess if I had to psychoanalyze myself... Sometimes it’s nice. Sometimes I’m like, damn, like, I look good. Sometimes it’s directed at a particular person.”

Interviewer: “So you’d post something in the hopes that someone would in particular, would see it?”

P21: “Yeah, like I might have been messaging them. And then the next day, I’ll like take a photo and it’ll be a nice photo and I’ll be oh, I wonder if this person will react to that.”

Using the Close Friends story on Instagram or private stories on Snapchat was a common way to restrict the audience of NSFW posts if participants thought what they were posting was too much to share with all of their followers. However, as P16 noted, Instagram’s content restrictions limit how explicit content can be on Close Friends. Since receiving a warning from Instagram for posting an image that contained some nudity, he said that he stopped using the story as much because in the case his account gets banned, he does not want to have to explain why. Even if participants did not use Close Friends in this way, a number described how they had seen others posting thirst traps there. However, participants also identified issues around consent when sharing thirst traps or NSFW content, especially to restricted audiences ⁶³.

Similar to how participants used restricted stories to post less curated presentations to a subset of trusted people ⁶⁴, they could also be used for sharing updates about NSFW topics. For example, P16 described posting thirst traps on Close Friends but also shared that:

“more often than not, it’s just me talking about not safe for work topics. I have done little Instagram games where I will do a - it’s like an ask me anything, an AMA, but I respond with a quiz and they have to pick the right answer. Sometimes, you get someone sending you an inappropriate question and I think to myself well, I can’t answer that on my public story, so I’ll do Close Friends.” [P16]

Similarly, some participants talked about how they might post stories about their interactions with others in sexual spaces or on dating apps to their friends. This

⁶³ We discuss this in more detail as part of *Navigating consent when sharing NSFW content* (§ 5.3.4.2.5, p. 123).

⁶⁴ See *Being more authentic with trusted audiences* (§ 5.3.5.1, p. 131).

could be about positive experiences, for example, P19 shared a screenshot of a flattering message he had received on Grindr on his Close Friends story. However, this could also be after a negative interaction:

“I do remember on Grindr, for some reason, some guy randomly messaged me and said sorry, not into Asian... I did rant about that moment to [my friends]. And yeah, it was kind of fun to like, you know, just make fun of that person, or like, you know, just really drag him. But like, there was just something cathartic about that.” [P24]

Both P16 and P17, who use Snapchat stories to post NSFW content, described having multiple tiers of stories which varied in audiences and how sexually explicit they were. For example P16 described the three tiers of his private Snapchat stories as:

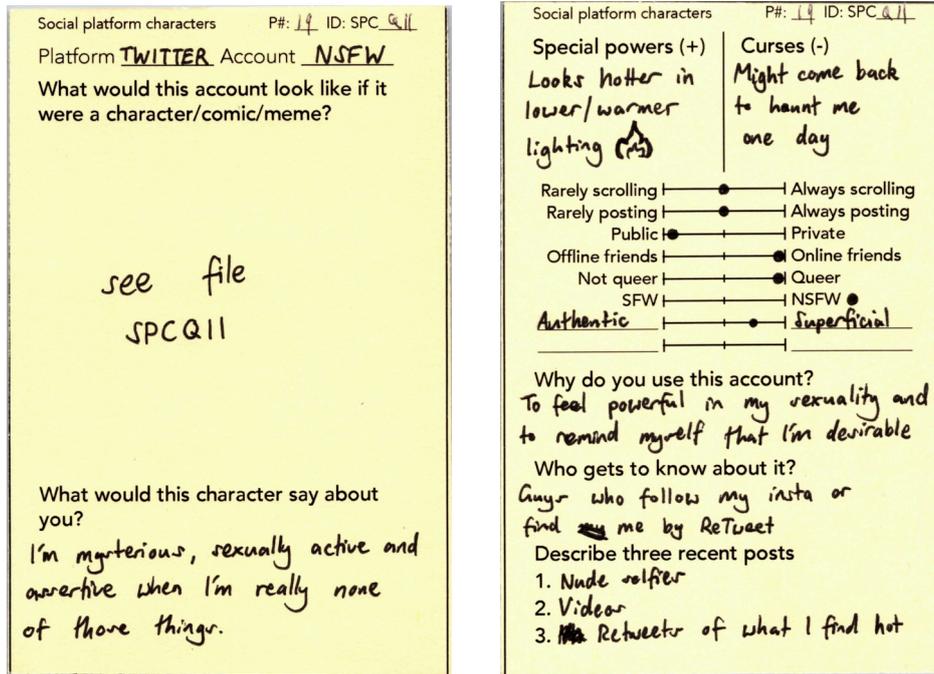
Tier 1: “Open as a sort of a link for anyone in the public story to join as a – not me posting naked pictures of myself, but me talking about something that - like a part of my life that I don’t want to talk about on my public story such as my Twitter account or about a conversation I’ve had on Grindr or something like that.”

Tier 2: “The main one that I post to when I’m posting to any of the private stories is one that I do post naked pictures of myself, but it doesn’t usually tend to be like a sexual context. Sometimes, I will talk about like I just had this hook up where this happened or something like that but it tends to be more like a space for those that I’m comfortable disclosing that information to rather than anyone who just is curious I guess from my Snapchat friends.”

Tier 3: “Very much a sort of a sexual based one where I might take a video of me masturbating or something just because I know that excites some people.” [P16]

Similarly, P17 described having a Snapchat story for “the gays and the hornies, but of my friend group. Yeah. Mostly people who aren’t like, you know, horny enough to be on my other Snapchat [stories], but are like horny enough to respect my sexual liberty”. Although Close Friends does not currently support having multiple lists of people, each account has its own list. For P19 who has main and NSFW alt Instagram accounts, this means he has two Close Friends stories which he uses.

Even if participants shared images of themselves that were revealing, they were not necessarily sexual. For example, as P16 described above in relation to his second tier story, even if he posted more revealing picture, they were not often in a “sexual context”. Similarly, P21 described how, if he got badly sunburned while wearing a speedo, he might post on BeReal where he only has close friends a picture where he is “naked with my hand covering the absolute minimum parts [so] that everyone can see where I’ve been burned my ass where it’s plain white and creamy”. As he



(a) The front of the card. The file referenced is not shown to protect P19's privacy.

(b) The back of the card.

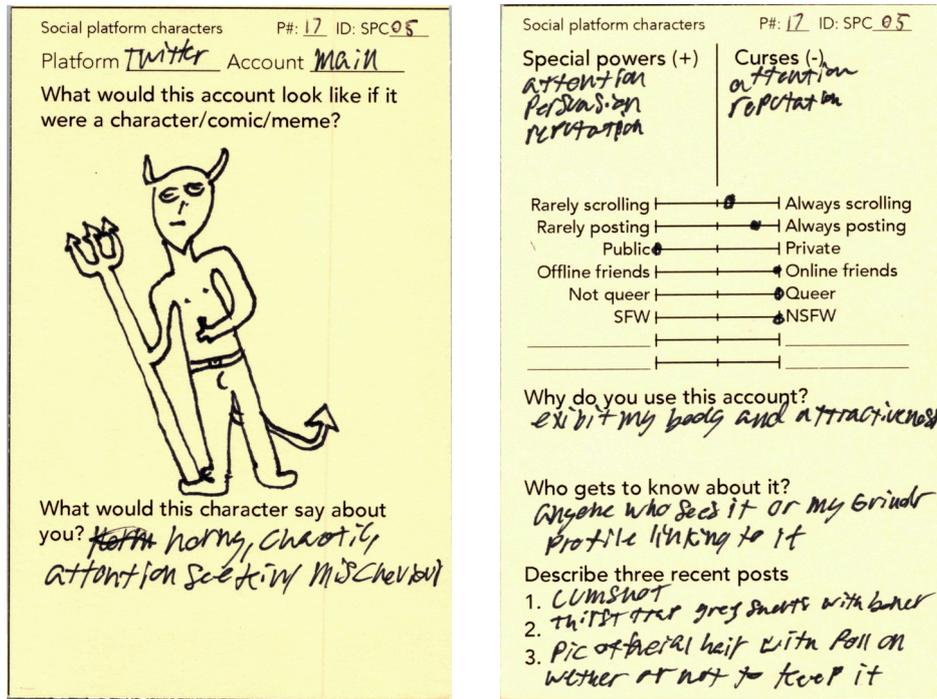
Figure 5.26: The Social Platform Character card P19 created for his NSFW Twitter account.

continued:

“I don’t see it as revealing, I think it’s just the body. I think it’s just in it’s not like it’s not intimate or sexual. It’s just what I looked like stupidly on that day. Yeah, so there’s not it’d be the same reason why you you’d ask why would you want to show your... like your arm? It’s just like, it’s just a butt.” [P21]

5.3.4.2.3 Posting on NSFW alt accounts to get validation Many participants shared how they used Not Safe for Work (NSFW) alt accounts on social platforms. Most talked about using them to view NSFW content, while a handful also described experiences using accounts on Twitter and Instagram to such content publicly. Participants’ reasons for creating these accounts varied although they commonly described the sense of validation they provided as the reason they used them. For example, P17 created an alt Twitter account to share NSFW content because he enjoyed the validation he had received when sharing similar content on Grindr.

“I just started up my Twitter to like, collate and exhibit my videos, the things that people appreciate the things that people compliment me on. Yeah, and I still... as a more consistent source for these positive comments” [P17]



(a) The front of the card.

(b) The back of the card.

Figure 5.27: The Social Platform Character card P17 created for his Twitter account.

P16 shared that his account made up a “lot of [his] sense of self-worth” while P19 wrote that he uses it “to feel powerful in my sexuality and to remind myself that I’m desirable” on his Social Platform Character probe card for his account (see Figure 5.26). Participants talked about posting content when they felt good about their bodies and wanted to share it, or as both P16 and P19 phrased it, when they were “feeling myself”. As P19 elaborated, this could also be if he has new underwear or outfits he wants to show off, a recent haircut or if he has made progress at the gym.

Beyond direct validation from content that they posted, amassing a following on NSFW alt accounts could also be about status. For example, P16 talked about how getting the attention of specific people could give him “bragging rights” and described being disappointed when he was no longer “top of the friend group” in terms of the number of followers on Twitter. Similarly, P17 described that he might share a post on his Snapchat story when he hits 5,000 followers on his Twitter account to get congratulations from his friends.

The reputation participants built for themselves through their NSFW alt accounts could be both positive and negative. For example, P17 listed “attention” and “reputation” as both special powers and curses for his Twitter account (see Figure 5.27). While he explained that he has not really had “bad” attention, he is very cautious of receiving it and tries not to post anything controversial as a result. Similarly, while P17 saw the amount of validation the account provides as positive,

he also described feeling overwhelmed by the number of direct messages he receives. To manage this, he has his Twitter and Snapchat alt accounts on a separate phone that he can ignore if he does not “want to think about content creation”.

Similarly, while posting content online helped a number of participants feel more confident through the volume of positive reactions that they had, not receiving validation from specific people could have a negative impact. For example, P16 described how he could feel a sense of rejection when he was trying to get the attention of people who did not respond, especially if he knew of their interactions with friends of his, or could see their interactions on Twitter. This could also extend to interactions in the physical realm.

“I feel like it happens more often than not in-person these days where actually, the way that I’ve come to perceive myself through social media and especially through Twitter where I have now a bigger following than I had first imagined that I would ever have and then going into kind of real spaces like going to parties and going to gay bars and clubs and all that and not getting as much attention and for that to be like kind of making me think well, maybe I’m not as good as I think I am, you know?” [P16]

While participants’ posts on NSFW platforms were ostensibly presenting idealised versions of themselves to seek validation, they were not necessarily inauthentic and the level of curation that went into posts varied. For example, P19’s Social platform character card included a scale he created for “authentic” vs “superficial” and indicated it to be approximately 75% superficial. When asked why he thought it was partly authentic, P19 described that when he films videos for his Twitter account, he is usually in the moment and not “too concerned” with the way he looks. In contrast, P19 said that if he takes a photo to share, he is prone to retaking it multiple times which he thinks comes off as superficial. Constrained by having to take a video in the moment and not being able to do a retake, he described that “in that sense that it feels like... authentic and real”. Similarly, P17 differentiated between the type of content that he posts and the amount of effort he puts into curating it depending on the platform and what he is seeking:

“So Twitter is mainly for just relatively low effort content that I put out, like almost daily... and then, with OnlyFans... it has an even higher threshold, because it’s not just stuff that I would want to see, but stuff that I would be willing to pay for... and then of course, Snapchat. Also, I don’t use it that much. But it’s much more personal, even more lower effort than Twitter just, I feel like filming a quick thing, just for a little bit of attention from people saying, ‘oh, you look great’. Snapchat is definitely more instant gratification. Whereas Twitter is more consistent gratification.” [P17]

P16 described how after losing access to his Twitter account and taking a break

from “gay Twitter”, he missed the validation it provided but also the community he had found on the platform ⁶⁵.

As we discuss in the next theme, monetising posting of NSFW could also impact the way participants chose to present themselves.

5.3.4.2.4 Monetising posting NSFW content Some participants talked about the ways they had tried to monetise sharing NSFW content online. For example, P11 described his desire to sell NSFW content through direct messages on Twitter. Mostly these participants had OnlyFans accounts and talked about their use of those in conjunction with their Twitter accounts. While many people post NSFW on Twitter and OnlyFans to earn income, that was not necessarily the only reason to do so for participants. For example, when asked about his motivations for posting NSFW content on OnlyFans, P17 responded:

“Well, I don’t make much money from it. So there isn’t much of work aspect. And most of my content is just up on Twitter for free. I’ve seen plenty of people who post what I post and they just post it on OnlyFans and have little snippets on their Twitter. but no, it’s it’s very much about the attention and the gratification, you know, having other people find worth in me and what I’m doing.” [P17]

P19 described creating an OnlyFans account as a “rebellious” way to recoup money he had lost on an adult site that he was unaware he had been subscribed to. Following this, he created his NSFW Instagram and Twitter alt accounts with the initial purpose of promoting his OnlyFans. When the OnlyFans account “died down”, he decided he wanted to continue to post on the alt accounts as he enjoyed it. P16 shared that others had encouraged him to create an OnlyFans account but that he was initially reluctant to turn posting NSFW content online into work as he wanted to “keep it as a fun thing”. However, he eventually changed his mind and decided to create an account as a way to supplement his income. Additionally, he saw it as an opportunity to reach out to and potentially befriend people he admired who had successful OnlyFans accounts.

“[A couple friends] had OnlyFans accounts. And those two actually seemed to really bond over the fact that they had, you know, they both had OnlyFans accounts, and they were, you know, talking about the content and everything. And one was actually like very successful on OnlyFans... seeing his success kind of made me think, well, you know, maybe it’s worth a shot. And I could use a little bit of extra income. So I kind of just thought, yeah, why not? And I could also use this experience to ask questions to these friends who have OnlyFans accounts and ask some of my other friends who’ve had OnlyFans accounts and even ask some porn stars and people that I really look up to, like through Twitter and everything about their OnlyFans accounts.” [P16]

⁶⁵ See *Finding community and peer support in more loosely defined sub-communities* (§ 5.3.6.1.3, p. 147) for more discussion of finding community on NSFW gay Twitter.

Monetising sharing NSFW content could also bring new expectations and push participants into uncomfortable territory. For example, while P16 had tried to keep his Twitter account anonymous by not posting any content with his face, he felt that he could not get away with this on OnlyFans. Despite concerns that it might “come back and bite [him] at some stage”, he felt he needed an incentive – content that included his face and felt more personal – for people to subscribe to his OnlyFans and not just view his content on Twitter. As we described in the previous sub-theme, P17 sees different thresholds in terms of what he posts on different accounts, and the pressure he felt to create content that was worth the subscription price of his OnlyFans could play into his insecurities:

“...the difficulty with that is I can see that other people find me attractive, but I don’t find myself attractive. So it’s very hard for me to gauge, you know, what’s worth \$5 a month. So I’ve been really struggling with coming up with things to put on my OnlyFans” [P17]

5.3.4.2.5 Navigating consent when sharing NSFW content While protecting privacy was often cited as a reason for keeping a distinction between SFW and NSFW accounts, participants also expressed how this allowed people to opt in, and thus consent, to seeing NSFW content. While this works for alt accounts (where someone can actively choose to follow an account), the person posting Close Friends stories on Instagram or private stories on Snapchat determines who the audience is. Multiple participants thought this was problematic given there is no way for someone to opt out without directly asking⁶⁶. As a workaround to this, P15 shared how he had seen someone post a poll on their Instagram Close Friends list to ascertain who was happy to see NSFW content. He lamented, however, about having seen this poll after NSFW had been posted and questioned whether Close Friends was the right place for such content.

“The fact that you have to ask for consent, the fact that you have to ask your close friends, hey, are you okay [to be here]? It’s like, hey, maybe that means - if you’re asking for consent, maybe it’s not the right place to put - if you’re already asking then that means there’s a reason why you’re asking. That means that some people might find that not okay. Then obviously that’s a sign that maybe you shouldn’t post that stuff, if you’re asking for consent. But, yeah, no... because he’s asking for consent, that’s the correct thing to do. But it’s like, once you’ve already seen it, it’s like, oh, hey, by the way, are you okay with seeing that? It’s a bit interesting.” [P15]

Some of those who chose to share NSFW accounts or stories with friends talked about ways they tried to seek consent. For example, when asked why he chose to create an alt account on Instagram to post thirst traps instead of using the Close Friends list, P7 replied:

⁶⁶ As we discuss in *Curating spaces to interact with trusted audiences* (§ 5.3.5.1.1, p. 131), some participants felt uncomfortable being added to peoples’ Close Friend lists even if the content they posted was not NSFW.

Social platform characters P#: 19 ID: SPC 06

Platform Grindr Account Main

What would this account look like if it were a character/comic/meme?



What would this character say about you?

[REDACTED] profile may seem fake or unapproachable but I like the facade of my "character", opposite of me

Social platform characters P#: 19 ID: SPC 06

<p>Special powers (+)</p> <p>Will reply when I'm online or I have notifications turned off.</p> <p>Rarely scrolling Always scrolling</p> <p>Rarely posting Always posting</p> <p>Public</p> <p>Offline friends Online friends</p> <p>Not queer Queer</p> <p>SFW NSFW</p>	<p>Curses (-)</p> <p>Never have time to actually meet up with you. like ever.</p>
--	---

Why do you use this account?
Cos I'm a bored, unmotivated gay boy. Have made multiple friends also.

Who gets to know about it?
Whoever is nearby ☺

Describe three recent posts

1. NSFW
2. NSFW
3. NSFW

(a) The front of the card. Redacted to preserve privacy.

(b) The back of the card.

Figure 5.28: The Social Platform Character card created by P19 for his Grindr profile.

"I just didn't want to necessarily do the, like, choosing of who gets to see it myself... It was kind of like, I didn't really care if people I don't know, look at it. And I also don't want to, like, necessarily inflict upon my friends things that... they may not want to see stuff like that." [P7]

Similarly, P16, when creating NSFW stories on Snapchat and P19, when creating an NSFW alt account on Instagram, both posted a link a subset of their followers could see, allowing them to opt into joining or following the NSFW story or account.

"For that particular [Snapchat] story [where I post more sexual content], if I post on it, I might also post on the other one saying hey, I just posted this to that story and if you want to join, here's the link." [P16]

5.3.4.3 Curating dating app profiles

Participants' dating app profiles were another place they described curating an attractive image, as we discuss in this theme. We describe this across three sub-themes:

- *Optimising dating app profiles* (§ 5.3.4.3.1, p. 124).
- *Linking to other social platforms from dating apps* (§ 5.3.4.3.2, p. 128).
- *Maintaining discretion or anonymity on dating apps* (§ 5.3.4.3.3, p. 129).

5.3.4.3.1 Optimising dating app profiles Some participants described how they curated their presentations on dating app profiles. For example, several participants had revealing photos on their profiles and explained how this could garner more attention. For P16, having revealing pictures on his profile and linking to his NSFW alt Twitter ⁶⁷ helps him feel good about himself, project confidence, and show potential suitors what “they’re getting into”. Some participants presented a persona or character on their dating app profiles. For example, P19 shared the following when discussing the Social Platform Character card he created for Grindr (see Figure 5.28):

“I’m very different in-person as to how I portray myself on Grindr. Like, you know, I can be all like, sexy and stuff and all that shit. But that’s not really like how I am like, day to day it’s definitely like, a separated part of myself. And I think that’s why, like, it’s a character and like, you know, it’s kind of fun to yeah, to like to see how people approach me when they perceive me like this” [P19]

Some participants described curating dating app profiles as a continual endeavour, or even something they might do in the moment. P5 described how he sees curating his profile as a marketing exercise and how he tries to stay current with trends. Both he and P23 described the ways that they would experiment with their profiles and optimise them to stand out and get more attention. For example, P23 described changing his profile picture to get validation:

“It was a great... sometimes I’d use it as a confidence boost, like I put my face on and like, I’d be like, I’d feel good about myself, because lots of people messaged me, or if I put my body on and lots of people messaged me, I’d be like, ah, that also feels good. Like, it was just validating, to be honest.” [P23]

For P5, optimising his dating app profiles also extended to having the right amount of information in his bios. For example, he described his Hinge profile as having the most amount of information about himself while his Grindr only describes what he is looking for. Tinder he said is “all about personality in a bio”. However, he highlighted that it is not as complete a profile compared to his Hinge because he wants to incentivise people to ask questions. In line with many participants talking about Tinder as a platform more for finding relationships than hookups, some commented that they have less revealing profiles on the platform, and P19 shared that he only portrays a character on his Grindr profile ⁶⁸.

The kinds of pictures participants chose to present on their profiles, and how anonymous they chose to be, could also reflect and signal what they were looking for in the moment. For example, P1 talked about how, when he is looking for more

⁶⁷ See *Linking to other social platforms from dating apps* (§ 5.3.4.3.2, p. 128) for discussion of how participants did this.

⁶⁸ See *Using a spectrum of dating apps* (§ 5.3.6.2, p. 151) for discussion of how participants see the purposes of each dating app.

social connections, he is happy to display his face, but if he is looking more for hookups, he prefers a more discreet profile. However, as P16 experienced, norms around what different kinds of profile pictures represent could create issues when they contradicted participants' intentions. As described above, P16 enjoys having a profile with revealing images, but shared that this sometimes gives people the wrong impression about what he is after, leading to people being very blunt or sending unsolicited explicit pictures⁶⁹. Others, such as P15, wanted to keep their dating app profiles up to date so they provided an accurate representation of who they were.

“Grindr, it’s all full of selfies. I do change that, I change that more now than I used to before. [I do that] to show my current self or just how I’m feeling in that moment. Because I feel like I’m way different to how I used to be, like last year I guess and I’ve grown. Then so just to show that growth. Yeah, I do [change] them... because this picture, this selfie or picture of myself, does this show the current me?” [P15]

Some participants also commented on the way that platforms are designed to encourage users to seek and rely on validation. Similarly, a number of participants described how they had used dating apps as a kind of game to get validation⁷⁰. As P5 described:

“I think Grindr is – it’s toxic because it’s that – and this for Tinder as well. It feels like a game. I think the way that it’s designed, the app is designed, it feels like a game. I know a lot of people who would go on Grindr at an event and they’re not necessarily there to look for anything or have a hook-up but will look at their – how many views they get on their profile or how many messages they get. They will take that as – how much attention they get is how much they’re worth as a person. If they don’t get that validation, yeah, it’s quite damaging, I think.” [P5]

P23 described how some nights, before deleting the app, he would stay up late talking to people on Grindr trying to find someone to hookup with. As part of one of the Day of Social Platforms probes (see Figure 5.29), he drew a graph of his confidence levels recalling how he would use the app. He would strategically open the app so that he would appear on the grid to other users before closing it. When reopening it, he would have received a lot of attention and his confidence would increase. As he described, it would build up as he started chatting to someone and then plummet, for example, if they blocked him after he sent more pictures. As the night went on, his confidence would fluctuate as he interacted with others and he described the internal conflict that kept him on the app until he would eventually give up if he hadn’t found someone.

“There’s a two internal voices like duelling here where it says, ‘come on,

⁶⁹ See *Navigating mismatched expectations on dating apps and issues around consent* (§ 5.3.6.4, p. 158) for more discussion of such negative interactions.

⁷⁰ In *Using dating apps in more intentional ways* (§ 5.3.5.3.1, p. 141) we explore how a number of participants changed their behaviour to avoid this.

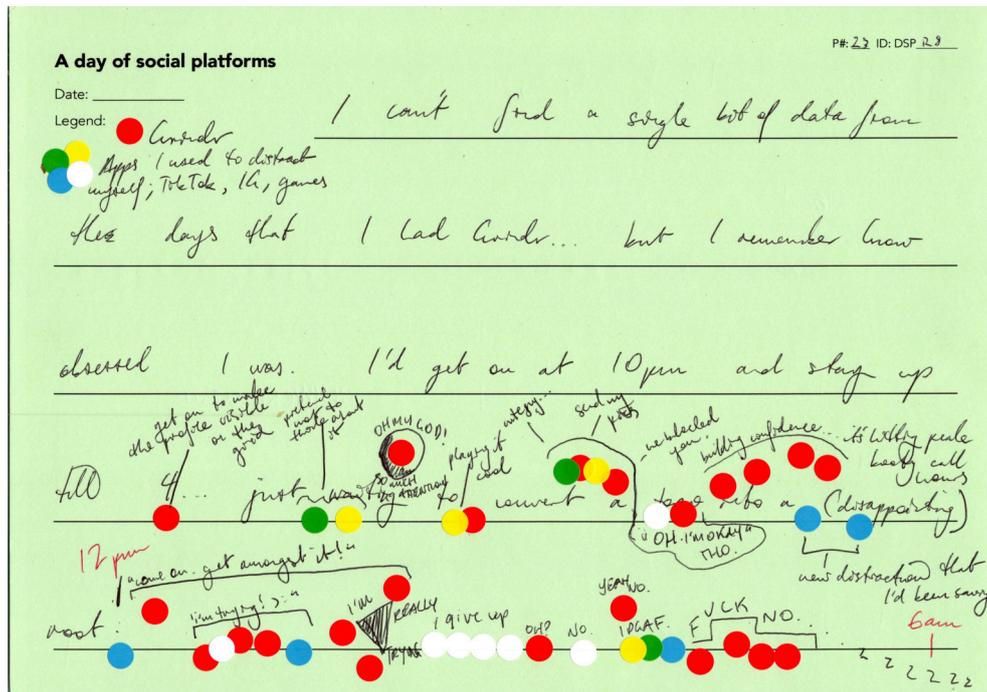


Figure 5.29: A Day of Social Platforms from P23 who mapped out how he often opened Grindr before he deleted the app.

get amongst it’ and ‘I’m trying’. So me like, trying to motivate myself and also me like not feeling confident enough but feeling like I’m kind of obligated to or, like just wanting to persevere and not wanting to give up because that would mean that I’m like giving into my insecurities, do you know what I mean?” [P23]

On the other hand, P17 described how the validation he had received, particularly on Grindr, had improved his self-confidence and how he saw that as a positive. While he described how many of his interactions with people on social platforms could be negative, the amount of compliments he has received helped him feel more confident in his appearance.

“I didn’t even realize that people found me attractive until I went onto Grindr, and people told me that I was attractive. And after, like, enough time, I was like, okay, people find me attractive. I’ll accept that. So, it was good for me because I made sure to level my expectations to recognise that the compliments and the insults are very surface level. But not everyone can do that. A lot of people they take the compliments to heart, and they’ll take the insults even more to heart.” [P17]

For P17, this kind of validation let him set up a NSFW alt Twitter account ⁷¹ and as we discuss in the next sub-theme, he, like a number of participants, chose to link to it from his Grindr profile.

⁷¹ See *Posting on NSFW alt accounts to get validation* (§ 5.3.4.2.3, p. 119) for more discussion of participants posting on such accounts.

5.3.4.3.2 Linking to other social platforms from dating apps It was common to link to other platforms, especially from Grindr which has a built-in way to do this ⁷². Having a linked Instagram account could be a way to build trust and show that they were real ⁷³. However, some participants, such as P5, chose to link to their profiles as a way to gain Instagram followers.

“I think the sole reason of having it there – I know for me, my biggest thing is to gain interaction on Instagram, so getting followers or getting engagement of any kind.” [P5]

Participants who had NSFW alt accounts ⁷⁴ commonly linked to them from their Grindr profiles. In describing why they linked their alt accounts, they mentioned liking that others might message them based on the explicit photos they had posted there, that it was easier than manually sharing them with specific people, and that it might gain them more followers on those accounts. P16 described that he feels comfortable linking to his NSFW on Grindr because he thinks people on the platform are unlikely to be judgemental of it. P17 and P19 only linked to their NSFW alt accounts from their dating app profiles, and P17 described how this allowed him to keep his main accounts with his real name private from people who were just interested in sexual interactions, whether online or in-person. P19 shared that it can sometimes be awkward when people recognise him from his alt accounts:

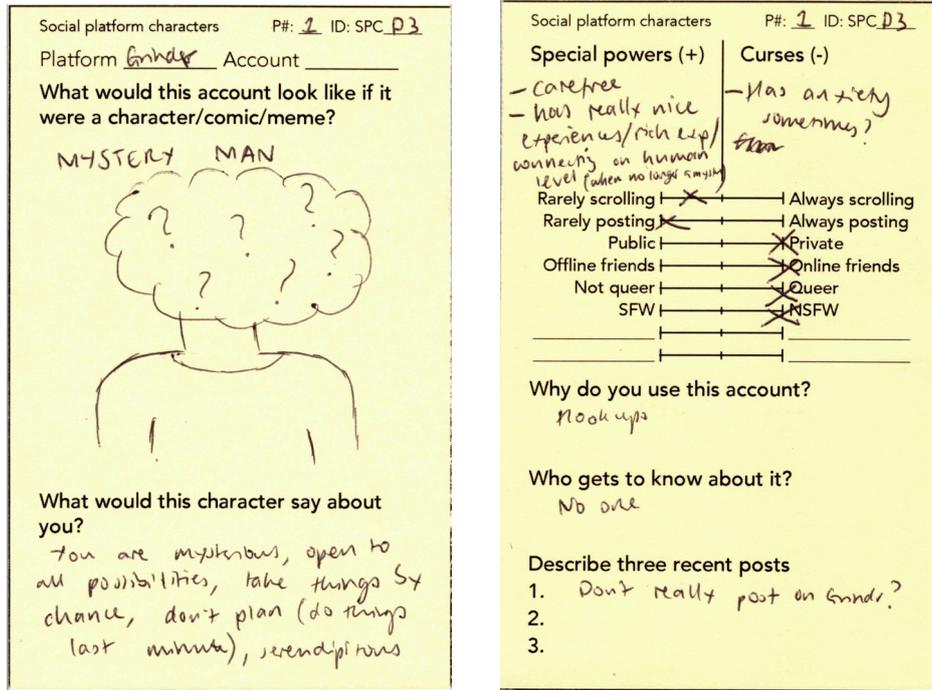
“I’ve had a few public occurrences [where people have recognised me from my alt accounts]. But that was mainly only because of Grindr I guess but I mean honestly, like, if they’ve seen me on Grindr, they’ve seen my Twitter and, and Instagram by now and it doesn’t really faze me. Like it’s a bit initially awkward at first and like, oh, shit, like, yeah, I’ve seen them, they’ve, they’ve seen me, but hmm whatever, what can I do about it now? Like, I just I don’t know, I’m not too fazed like, everyone’s showing every body part on the internet these days so I don’t feel like... you know sure, something bad might come of it, but I’m not gonna be the only one.” [P19]

On the other hand, some participants explicitly described not linking their dating app profiles to other social platform accounts to preserve their privacy. For P23, the decision to link to his Instagram varies by platform. On Grindr he has a profile with very little information about him and has never linked to Instagram whereas on Tinder and Hinge, his profiles contain more personal information and are linked. Whether profiles were linked could also shape how participants chose to interact with others. For example, P21 feels much more comfortable sharing explicit photos on Grindr compared to other platforms because it’s not linked to a public profile others might be able to share or identify him from. In the following sub-theme, we

⁷² See *Grindr as a place for hookups* (§ 5.3.6.2.1, p. 152) for more information about the app.

⁷³ As we discuss in *Building rapport, trust and relationships with people from dating apps* (§ 5.3.6.5, p. 162)

⁷⁴ See *Posting on NSFW alt accounts to get validation* (§ 5.3.4.2.3, p. 119) for more discussion of NSFW alt accounts.



(a) The front of the card.

(b) The back of the card.

Figure 5.30: The Social Platform Character card created by P1 for his Grindr profile.

discuss more ways participants navigated privacy concerns when curating their dating app profiles.

5.3.4.3.3 Maintaining discretion or anonymity on dating apps

Participants varied in how anonymous or, conversely, identifiable they made their dating app profiles. Some talked about having a “discreet” profile that did not show their faces, for example, P1 described being a “mystery man” on Grindr because he did not want to be identifiable when looking for hookups (see Figure 5.30). On the other hand, both P6 and P24 highlighted that only other queer people would see their profiles and that this made them feel comfortable being identifiable.

There was also variation in how participants felt about those they knew being able to see their profiles or use of dating apps. P21 talked about blocking the friends he sees on Grindr because he does not want them to be able to see when he is online or the revealing photos on his profile. Others were more comfortable with their friends being able to see their profiles. Some participants also spoke about hiding their use of dating apps from others. For example, P19 sees using Grindr as private and intimate and would not want others to see him on it, while P24 described hiding his use of dating apps from an unsupportive parent.

Situational or geographic contexts could also impact how participants navigated visibility on dating apps, particularly Grindr due to its people nearby model. For example, P23 described how he avoids opening Grindr at work because he does not



Figure 5.31: The Honest Social Platform Ad P21 created for Grindr. The location he references is redacted to preserve his privacy.

want colleagues to find his profile on the app. He also shared that if he is in a new area, he may remove his profile picture so he can check if he knows anyone who is nearby before re-adding it. As P21 noted, geographical differences in acceptance of LGBTQ+ people could also impact whether people chose to post face pictures on their Grindr profiles. As he described in response to the Honest Platform Ad he created for the profile (see Figure 5.31), the number of faceless profiles he saw greatly increased whenever he was visiting home in a suburb further away from the central city, and that also had a high proportion of negative votes in the marriage equality plebiscite⁷⁵. In contrast, location could also be a reason to be visible on Grindr. For example, as discussed above⁷⁶, P16 uses Grindr to see which friends were in the area on a night out clubbing.

5.3.5 Sharing less idealised presentations

In the previous overarching theme, we explored how participants tried to curate an attractive image on the platforms they used. In this overarching theme, we move to discussing the ways participants shared less idealised versions of themselves. We do this across three themes:

- *Being more authentic with trusted audiences* (§ 5.3.5.1, p. 131).
- *Using social platforms to post about things that are difficult or unpleasant*

⁷⁵ See *The Australian context* (§ 2.3.2, p. 14) for details of the plebiscite.

⁷⁶ See *Using dating apps as a way to find peers* (§ 5.3.6.1.4, p. 149).

(§ 5.3.5.2, p. 138).

- *Overcoming self-comparison* (§ 5.3.5.3, p. 141).

5.3.5.1 Being more authentic with trusted audiences

As many participants described, spaces on social platforms where they could interact with trusted audiences provided a safe space for them to share less idealised presentations. We describe this across three sub-themes:

- *Curating spaces to interact with trusted audiences* (§ 5.3.5.1.1, p. 131).
- *Posting less curated presentations* (§ 5.3.5.1.2, p. 132).
- *Barriers to curating spaces with trusted audiences* (§ 5.3.5.1.3, p. 136).

5.3.5.1.1 Curating spaces to interact with trusted audiences Participants employed a range of strategies to curate spaces with trusted audiences where they could be more authentic in their self-presentation compared to within spaces with wider audiences. For example, such spaces could be used to share content that was more personal, self-deprecating or too embarrassing to share with wider audiences.

Some participants reserved specific platforms for only close friends, commonly BeReal, Snapchat and Twitter. Some created alt accounts they only shared with trusted friends, particularly if they had public main accounts which they used for work ⁷⁷. On the other hand, some participants described the spaces they used to express themselves freely in terms of who was not in the audience ⁷⁸. Many described how such spaces did not include family members or colleagues. For example, P1 described using Twitter as a diary and to vent even though the account is public, because his audience on Instagram includes family and work colleagues.

Having anonymous or pseudonymous accounts was often described as a way to make their accounts less discoverable to people they did not want following them. As some participants noted, the norms of platforms could shape this as well. For example, P22 had a more curated audience on Instagram where he uses a pseudonym and people are less likely to discover his account, compared to Facebook which uses his real name. For some participants, these spaces had audiences that consisted almost exclusively of people with whom they did not have existing connections. For example, P13 described that he fears high school bullies will find things he posts on accounts that can be traced back to him. As a result, he feels most comfortable expressing himself on Reddit where he can converse anonymously with others on the internet. Both he and P10 described their impression that people are very open and honest, because due to most peoples' anonymity on the platform, they are not trying to gain status.

In contrast to using separate accounts to share with trusted audiences, participants also described using platform affordances to restrict the visibility of posts. For

⁷⁷ See also *Self-censoring to avoid saying the wrong thing* (§ 5.3.4.1.4, p. 112) where we discuss this.

⁷⁸ As we discuss in *Curating disclosure of identity* (§ 2.4, p. 16), some participants also described deleting and recreating their accounts or retroactively curating their followers.

example, P18 described that he used to exclude his family and friends who were “blabber mouths” from some of his posts on Facebook. However, he said that it took a great deal of effort to set up and maintain, and as a result he now uses Instagram’s Close Friends feature, which he sees as simpler. Indeed, many participants describe using Instagram’s Close Friends list, which allows one to post stories to a curated selection of followers, almost like having a built-in alt account. For example, a number of participants described using their Close Friends list to post things they did not want family members or colleagues to see. While some participants described using their Close Friends list to post thirst traps for attention ⁷⁹, many described using the feature to share less curated sides of themselves to those they were closer to.

“I definitely trust the majority of the people who like follow me on Instagram. But I feel like [Close Friends] is like, just a small net of people who I can trust with a lot of stuff like trust with secrets, trust with my life, pretty much I think that’s like, who I include in my [Close] Friends list. So it just, I guess it just comes down to trust.” [P4]

Beyond the content of posts on restricted stories, some participants commented on the symbolism of being part of the audience. Posts on both Instagram Close Friends stories and Snapchat private stories are labelled as being shared with a curated audience. As some participants commented, seeing they have been added to someone’s Close Friends story could signify something about their relationship to the poster. For example, P10 described his reaction to being added as “I kind of feel honoured. I’m like, oh you’ve personally selected me to see this”. Similarly, P15 shared that he feels the need to react or respond to people’s Close Friends stories as a way to say “thanks for having me on close friends and for allowing me to see this side of you”.

On the other hand, some participants described how realising that they were on someone’s Close Friends could be uncomfortable if they did not consider their relationship to the poster as strong enough. As we discuss above in the context of people using Close Friends to post thirst traps ⁸⁰, there is no way to opt-out of being part of someone’s Close Friends which can be problematic if one does not want to see the content being posted.

“I dislike being on someone’s close friends if they’re not on mine? I don’t know if that’s a common experience, but it makes me feel like they are overestimating the friendship. And I’m like please get out of my space. I don’t want to know.” [P11]

In the following sub-theme, we describe the kinds of content participants posted in the spaces they curated, such as their Close Friends stories.

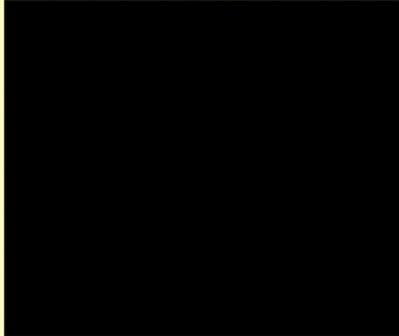
⁷⁹ See *Using main accounts to post thirst traps and NSFW content* (§ 5.3.4.2.2, p. 116).

⁸⁰ See *Navigating consent when sharing NSFW content* (§ 5.3.4.2.5, p. 123).

Social platform characters P#: 19 ID: SPC_Q13

Platform INSTA Account close friends

What would this account look like if it were a character/comic/meme?



What would this character say about you?

Average funny man who can laugh at himself but only on his own terms and when he knows he can balance it with a "hot" follow-up post.

Social platform characters P#: 19 ID: SPC_Q13

Special powers (+)	Curses (-)
<u>- Embraces the funny faces and ugly/imperfect moments / pics</u>	<u>- Gives ammo to unsuspecting blackmail, jokes taken too far</u>
Rarely scrolling <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Always scrolling	
Rarely posting <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Always posting	
Public <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Private	
Offline friends <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Online friends	
Not queer <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Queer	
SFW <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NSFW	
<u>Funny</u> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>Serious</u>	
<u>Genuine</u> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>Needy</u>	

Why do you use this account?
As a coping / acceptance of self mechanism.

Who gets to know about it?
Only Close Friends

Describe three recent posts

1. Funny candid shots of myself
2. "ugly" selfies e.g. blinking
3. Spontaneous story-telling while not caring about appearance

(a) The front of the card. He drew a picture of himself on the card and this has been redacted to preserve his privacy.

(b) The back of the card.

Figure 5.32: The Social Platform Character card P19 created for his Instagram Close Friends story.

5.3.5.1.2 Posting less curated presentations Many participants described how they shared more authentic, self-deprecating or silly sides of themselves on their Close Friends stories. Some participants shared how they would use it to make light of misadventures or tell funny stories⁸¹. For example, P19 shared that after a haircut that went “terribly wrong”, he shared his feelings about it on his Close Friends story and then started posting memes related to it. As he wrote on the Social Platform Character card he created for his Instagram Close Friends story, he uses it “as a coping/acceptance of self mechanism” (see Figure 5.32). As P19 also wrote on the Social Platform Character card, he uses his Close Friends story to share funny, ugly or imperfect moments, and this was common among participants. For example, P21 repeatedly described his Close Friends story as a place to post pictures of himself being a “twit” so that his friends would see and have a laugh.

The audience of their Close Friends stories meant that participants felt comfortable sharing such content and implicit was that those on the receiving end would be interested in seeing it (although, as we discuss in the previous sub-theme, this was not always the case). As a result, some participants also described how they could share content more freely instead of just sharing highlights. For example, P22 described posting content to Close Friends as a way to avoid “spamming” his wider audience, which he did not think would be interested in the volume of content he

⁸¹ As we discuss in *Posting to get support* (§ 5.3.5.2.1, p. 138), some participants also used their Close Friends story to seek support.

was posting, and P11 described his Close Friends audience as “people who actually care”. Similarly, P15 described the difference in posting to his Close Friends story compared to his main one:

“I share more like... with my Close Friends, there’s no filter, I guess. There’s none of that time process that you take on, like, what should I post? On close friends, I just post it. It’s something that I just capture and put on. Compared to if I post something [on main]... it’s at least five minutes [just] deciding what to post.” [P15]

Some participants talked about how BeReal encourages people to post less curated presentations⁸² and how they enjoyed seeing their friends’ posts on the platform. P9, P19 and P21 all commented on how relaxed or laid-back they saw the platform as being compared to Instagram. As they described, the platform imposes less pressure to present an idealised image as a result of its culture and the smaller audience of closer friends they had as part of their audience. This was also reinforced by seeing others post less curated content on the platform as well. When asked how he finds using the platform, P21 responded:

“actually really nice. Like, it’s good, I put up some really disgusting photos of myself sometimes when I’m hungover or like, it’s nice as well, because then you’re reminded that everyone’s working because you get, you know, three or four days in a row, three or four days out of the week, it’ll just be people sitting at their desks at work, or at home doing chores.” [P21]

P14 proposed a similar dynamic to BeReal, envisioning an Ideal Social Platform called “Anti-gram”⁸³ (see Figure 5.33). As he described, he had enjoyed posting less perfect moments after a string of instances in which he had locked himself out of the house and shared it on his Instagram story, and he wanted a platform that encouraged sharing less curated content with close friends.

Similarly, some participants commented that they used Snapchat to share more mundane or throwaway moments. For example, P1 completed a Moments Worth Screenshotting card for Snapchat that showed a Snapchat he had sent to friends that he thought was too mundane to post on his Instagram story or to directly message to someone on another platform (see Figure 5.34). Along with other participants, he ascribed Snapchat’s ephemerality⁸⁴ as part of the reason it can be used for less curated content. As P14 commented, Snapchat’s dynamic, where Snapchats are often sent to specific people instead of posted on a story, means that he sees it as a “more effective version of Instagram’s Close Friends” – it is easier to tailor the audience for each specific post.

⁸² As we discuss in *Only posting positive or the best things* (§ 5.3.4.1.1, p. 108), however, a number of participants still described the ways they tried to present their “best-selves” on the platform.

⁸³ P14 was interviewed after BeReal was initially released but before its popularity took off.

⁸⁴ “Snaps” which are photos or videos sent to people on Snapchat are only visible for a limited amount of time, as determined by the sender. The sender is notified if the recipient “replays”, “saves a Snap in chat” or screenshots a Snap. By default Snaps are only viewable a limited number of times unless saved.

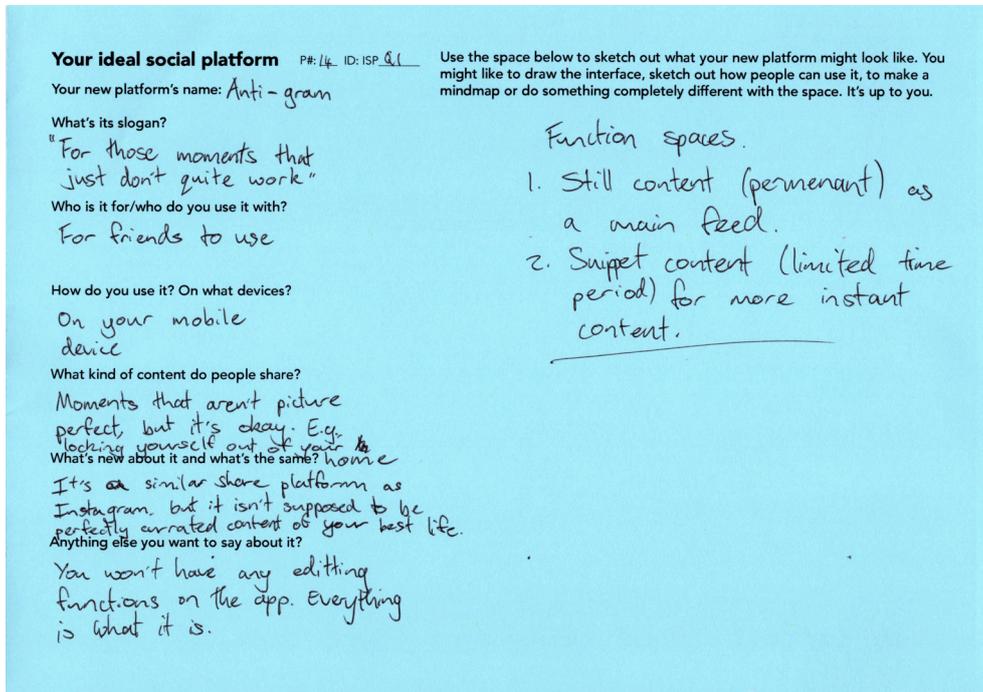


Figure 5.33: The Ideal Social Platform P14 envisioned.

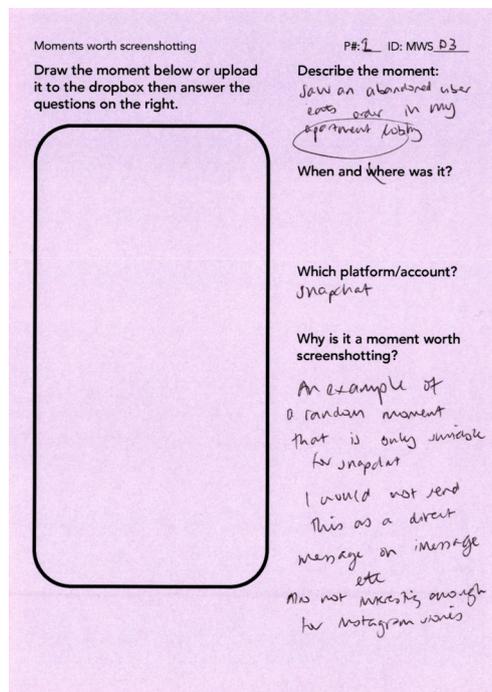


Figure 5.34: A Moments Worth Screenshotting card created by P1. He included a screenshot of the Snapchat he sent but this is not shown to protect his privacy as it shows his apartment lobby.

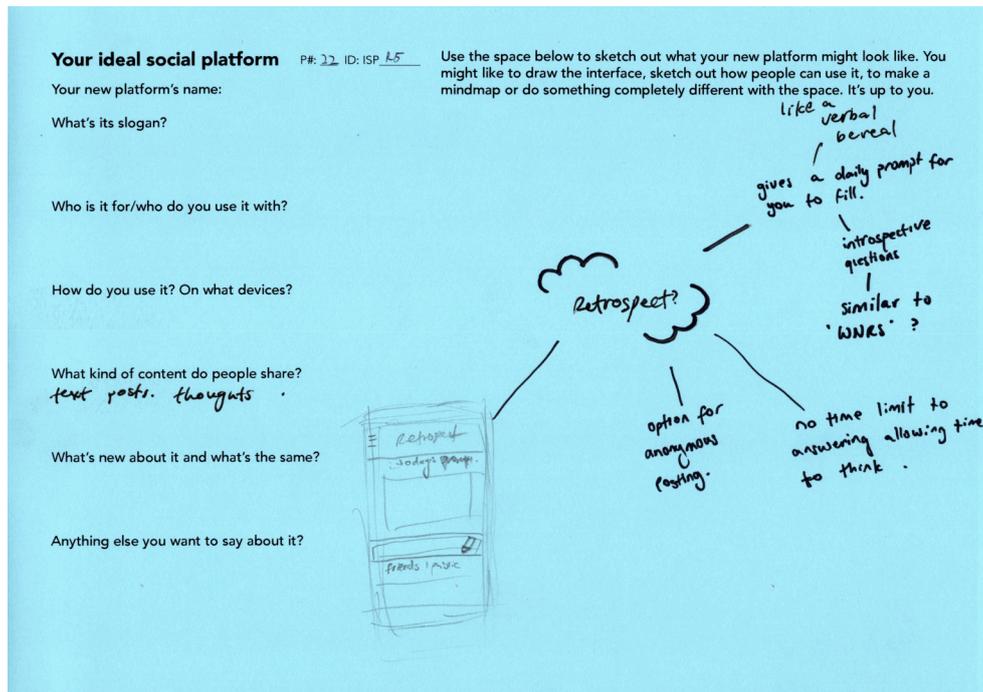


Figure 5.35: The Ideal Social Platform envisioned by P22.

The lack of ability on Snapchat for one to see what they have sent in a conversation thread with someone could also be beneficial. For example, P3 shared that he often uses Snapchat to send pictures and videos to friends while on nights out and that it is less embarrassing the next morning as he cannot see what he has sent.

Some participants also spoke of a desire to reflect on their experiences using social platforms. For example, P22 envisioned an Ideal Social Platform called Retrospect (see Figure 5.35) that would provide a structured and social way to reflect. He saw it similar to BeReal where there is a prompt to share, but thought it would provide a reflective question each time and be text-based. Similar to the way participants described posting their experiences and using their profiles for reflection⁸⁵, he saw this as both a way to share his thoughts with others, and a resource for his own reflection. Similarly, as we describe above⁸⁶, P11 uses Instagram to capture his transition progress to both share it with those he is close to, and for his own benefit.

5.3.5.1.3 Barriers to curating spaces with trusted audiences While participants found numerous ways to curate spaces with trusted audiences, they also expressed frustrations about barriers they faced. A common complaint was finding it burdensome to maintain post-specific privacy settings. While some, such as P18, found Instagram's Close Friends list easier to use than the detailed privacy settings for individual posts on Facebook, others described how they found it burdensome to maintain. Some participants, such as P16, described constantly updating lists for restricted audiences, however, others said they rarely updated them or found it too

⁸⁵ See *Curating idealised content for oneself* (§ 5.3.4.1.3, p. 111) for discussion of participants using the idealised content they posted for remembering.

⁸⁶ See *Asserting identity using social platforms* (§ 5.3.2.2, p. 92).

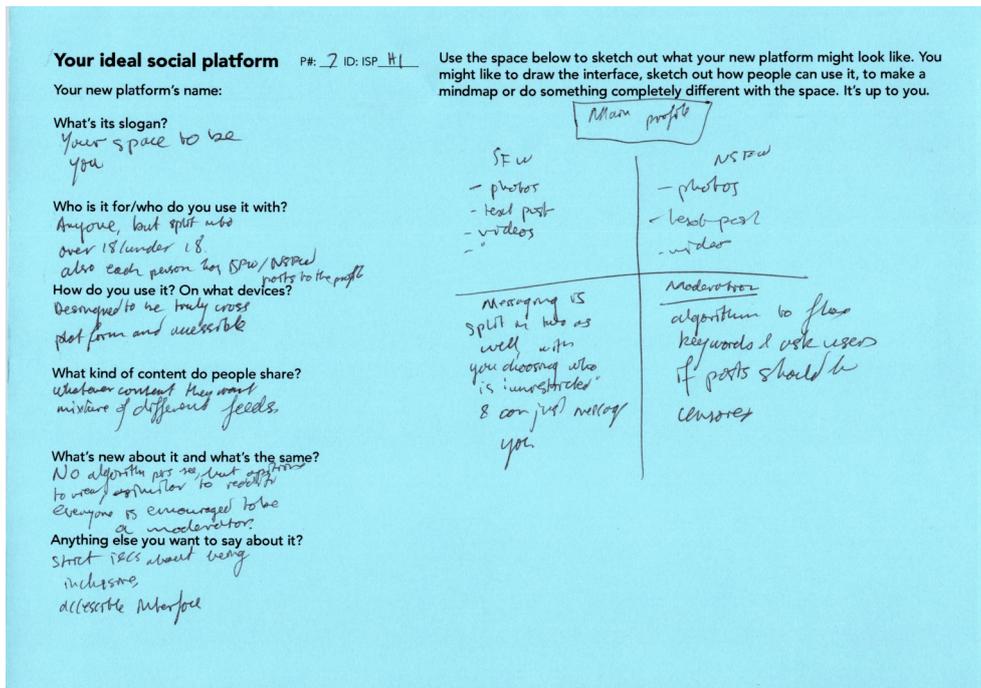


Figure 5.36: The Ideal Social Platform envisioned by P7.

effort to do so. For example, P23 described how he had stopped using Close Friends due to the effort required to “perform maintenance” of it. Similarly, P7 complained about maintaining multiple profiles and logins for his various main and alt accounts. As part of an Ideal Social Platform probe response, he envisioned having a single account with “different sections of the interface depending on what you want to do” (see Figure 5.36). Some participants also commented on the ease of creating alt accounts across various platforms, noting that Facebook makes it difficult to do so.

As we discuss above in the context of NSFW alt accounts⁸⁷, algorithmic suggestions of accounts to follow could prove problematic for participants. For example, P13 created an pseudonymous account on Facebook to use the platform while avoiding family and classmates. However, he says that despite being cautious to navigate the platform in a way that protects his identity, he is often recommended to add people he knows as friends. Similarly, some participants described how having their accounts across platforms linked without them realising had led to people discovering their accounts. For example, P2 described how he accidentally linked his Instagram account with Facebook and how this led to people finding it. A related complaint from participants was the way that Facebook might show traces of their activity on the platform to others. For example, P22 described that sometimes he might want to comment on a post for his “online friends” to see but that the platform might broadcast this to other people he is Facebook friends with.

Having a pseudonymous account could create challenges for participants when needing to interact with people whom they did not want to reveal their accounts to.

⁸⁷ See *Maintaining privacy and safety* (§ 5.3.4.2.1, p. 114).

For example, P13 described how this makes it difficult to RSVP to events hosted on Facebook. To get around this, he described pretending he does not have the platform and directly messaging event organisers.

Beyond platform affordances, some participants described how their audiences could be a barrier to curating trusted spaces. Often, this was a result of people sharing or discussing what participants had posted with people they had not included in their audiences. For example, P17 described how a post he had made seeking support⁸⁸ in a personal conflict with someone had been shared with that person by someone in the audience who knew both of them, exacerbating the conflict in the process. In this case, it may have been obvious to the person who shared P17's post that P17 did not want the person he was in conflict with to see it. However, ambiguity on the part of the audience over who else can see content could lead to unintentional disclosures and awkward interactions. For example, P23 described that since creating his Close Friends list, those he is close to and would like to have on it have changed. However, he worries that if he were to update the list, someone who remained on it may discuss something he posted with someone who was removed, and he does not want to deal with the social consequences of such an event occurring.

5.3.5.2 Using social platforms to post about things that are difficult or unpleasant

For a number of participants, social platforms provided a place where they could post about struggles. In this theme, we describe two sub-themes related to this:

- *Posting to get support* (§ 5.3.5.2.1, p. 138).
- *Posting to the void* (§ 5.3.5.2.2, p. 140).

5.3.5.2.1 Posting to get support Some participants described the way they viewed posting about their struggles to curated audiences as putting less pressure on individual people to support them⁸⁹. Commonly, although not always, participants shared such posts on restricted stories, either the Close Friends story on Instagram, or for P16 and P17, a Snapchat story only their closest friends could see. This could also be beneficial if participants did not feel comfortable asking someone for help directly, or if they were unsure who would have the capacity to support them. By posting something to a group of people, they could choose themselves whether they wanted to respond or not without the pressure of, for example, responding to a direct message. For some participants, this was especially the case if they were dealing with something highly emotional or distressing. For example, P17 described:

“If it was something dramatically impactful, like when I wanted to talk about my dad going through cancer, I didn't want to message anyone in

⁸⁸ See *Posting to get support* (§ 5.3.5.2.1, p. 138) for more discussion of participants posting to get support.

⁸⁹ See *Being more authentic with trusted audiences* (§ 5.3.5.1, p. 131) for discussion of the ways participants curated such audiences.

particular, because, you know, that's a lot of pressure to put on someone. Your friend's dad is dying of cancer. And you can't deal with that. You're dealing with your own problems, you're feeling very overwhelmed. And you're going to feel quite guilty that you're not able to help them when they're asking you directly for help. So that's when I would put it on my story and say, 'Hey, I'm feeling really overwhelmed about this. Is there someone who can talk to me?'" [P17]

Although a number of participants talked about sharing heavy topics in such ways, some also talked about sharing day-to-day struggles. For example, P15 described sharing a picture showing that he was watching a sad movie on Valentine's Day to show friends that he was "going through some tough alone time" and provide an opportunity for them to reach out. The support people sought on social platforms could also be practical in nature, instead of emotional. For example, P24 described polling his Instagram followers when he wanted opinions on what he should do, such as when picking a movie. Similarly, P21 gave examples of seeing friends posting to crowdsource information, find people to live with, or sell tickets they were no longer able to use.

Some participants talked about asking for advice from people on Reddit which has many groups (subreddits) for queer communities. While some described how the site could be useful for local information⁹⁰, those who posted seeking support described how it had not been helpful. For example, P11 described seeking advice when he was having a rough time as a trans man at his all girls high school but said that "it was just a one off, I got maybe three comments. And I was like, great, none of this is helpful". Similarly, P8 shared that he had posted looking for advice on how to meet other queer people and that the answers were all from an American context or suggested he go to bars, which he was not old enough to do at the time. On the other hand, P2 saw Reddit as a great place to get fitness advice, or product recommendations when buying something.

In contrast, a number of participants shared that they would never post online to get support and prefer to reach out to close friends directly. Some also commented that they think doing so is cringey, immature or attention seeking. P19 described that he sees a distinction between posting about what is happening in life without expecting a response and directly asking for support, which he sees as needy. He added a "genuine" vs "needy" scale to the Social Platform Character card he created for his Instagram Close Friends and when asked about it described (see Figure 5.32, p. 133):

"If I'm putting something in my Close Friends, that is personal, like yesterday when I was upset about my hair. That was on Close Friends just because it wasn't intentionally coming off needy... I didn't want feedback. I didn't want people to be commenting back. But I guess I'm afraid of it coming off needy because I really cringe at those people

⁹⁰ See *Learning about being LGBTQ+* (§ 5.3.1.1.1, p. 76).



Figure 5.37: An Honest Platform Ad P7 created for Twitter.

who put something up [needy]” [P19]

5.3.5.2.2 Posting to the void While some participants described posting to get support from specific people, others described how they used the platforms to express themselves to no one in particular. They often described this as venting “into the void” and Twitter was the most common platform participants mentioned for this. As P7 wrote in the Honest Platform Ad he created for Twitter, it is where “you can shout into the void without feeling empty” (see Figure 5.37). As participants described, the platform’s culture of being able to post random thoughts and the anonymity and limited audiences of the accounts participants spoke about made it an ideal place for this kind of expression. Some participants, such as P13, also described how the ease of posting contributed to this.

“I think Twitter is like, is like, it is such a good platform in terms of how it’s designed for like venting. Like, if you have a thought you can just like, budda budda boom, press tweet, it’s out there in the world, right?” [P13]

Although others could see their posts, the point was more to put something out there than to share it with anyone. For example, when P1 was asked whether he uses posting to his Twitter as a way to get support he responded:

“No, I don’t think so, because it really is just me kind of using it as like, my diary. And if other people happen to see it, then that’s, you know, that’s not really the main point of it. Because if I need support, I’ll just

talk to my friends in real life or message them.” [P1]

Some participants described how they had stopped posting to the void as much as they used to. For example, P22 shared that he now has LGBTQ+ friends who he can “go talk to in real life instead of just like venting online”. Similarly, P16 describes that these days he often reaches out to specific friends instead of venting on Twitter.

5.3.5.3 Overcoming self-comparison

“I think a lot of people, especially gay men kind of get lost in that they need to have a perfect body, look a certain way, all that stuff. And they end up kind of trapped in that world. Because they don’t see anything apart from that.” [P21]

As P21 describes in this quote, and as we explore above ⁹¹, there is great pressure to conform to an idealised version of what a queer man is, and it can be a trap. In this theme, we explore how participants managed to see beyond this world and the “toxic” culture they described. We do this across four sub-themes:

- *Using dating apps in more intentional ways* (§ 5.3.5.3.1, p. 141).
- *Avoiding content that could be triggering* (§ 5.3.5.3.2, p. 142).
- *Maintaining perspective* (§ 5.3.5.3.3, p. 142).
- *Posting (or not) more intentionally* (§ 5.3.5.3.4, p. 144).

5.3.5.3.1 Using dating apps in more intentional ways A number of participants shared ways that they were trying to be more intentional in their use of dating apps or had deleted them. For example, P8 shared that he used to see swiping on Tinder as “like a little game” and that he now tries to be more deliberate in his interactions with people on the app. Similarly, P14 shared how he moved from using Tinder as an “ego booster” to limiting himself to being “matched” with three people at a time and focusing his attention on having intentional conversations, before ultimately meeting his partner on the app and uninstalling it. P23 who described in detail the impact Grindr could have on his confidence while using the app ⁹² talked about how he had deleted the app and the positive impact it had on his mental health.

“I guess being more present in my, like, real life and what’s happening around me kind of, like, kind of made me not worry about what’s happening in like, the dating scene of it, of it all. And, you know, like, personally, for me, I used to also be in that, like, you know, like I used to, I wouldn’t say it was like a cycle for me for Grindr. But like, it was more so like, out of boredom and whatnot. But when I got more conscious with, you know, like, the things that I’m consuming on social

⁹¹ See *Wrestling with the pressure to conform to the image of an ideal queer man* (§ 5.3.3, p. 94)

⁹² See *Optimising dating app profiles* (§ 5.3.4.3.1, p. 124) where we describe how he, along with other participants, used the attention they garnered from their profiles for validation.

media every day, and, and you know, what’s happening in my real life in my world? That’s when I got to be more present. And, yeah, again, changed the way I use social media.” [P20]

5.3.5.3.2 Avoiding content that could be triggering A number of participants also took steps to avoid seeing idealised content. Many described how they unfollowed accounts that shared content they found triggering or saw as toxic. P10 described a “successful attempt to change [his] use of social media” where he stopped following influencers, models or people he didn’t know while continuing to follow accounts for news, magazines and journals. P21 shared how he avoids anyone he sees as too obsessed with status because he finds them “really toxic”. Others shared how they flagged suggested content they did not want to see to prevent it from being recommended by platform algorithms. P13 described how instead of curating the content he sees, he decided to entirely avoid consuming content on social platforms like Instagram.

“one thing that I’ve kind of learned over time is that with all of these digital platforms, because of like how easy it is to kind of like, straight up lie or create fiction in the digital world. Like it can really bleed into the reality. So kind of like, all the features, which allow me to kind of do that stuff. I’ve kind of just restricted myself from them. So pretty much just that ends up leaving you just to messaging and calling and that’s pretty much what I’ve done” [P13]

5.3.5.3.3 Maintaining perspective Many participants shared how shifting their perspective had helped them overcome negative self-comparison on social platforms. For example, P7 had recently started training for triathlon and this meant his perception of his body shifted away from comparing himself to many of the idealised bodies he saw on Instagram. He described he is now more concerned with his performance than his body fat percentage. Similarly, P2 deduced that many of the idealised physiques and lives that he had compared himself to on social platforms must be a result of steroids and party drugs – deciding that was not the lifestyle for him and trying to remember that when seeing their posts. Likewise, P8 when he notices himself engaging in self-comparison with people he thinks lead more exciting lives than him, reminds himself that most of the content he sees comes from a small number of his followers and is not likely to be representative. Finding perspective also helped P16, who described the negative self-comparison that resulted from seeing friends getting attention from people not interested in him. He said that he tries to remember that, “chances are, there have been situations where they’ve been in the same position”. Similarly, P17 who described being positively impacted by seeking validation on social platforms⁹³ described how he has learned to “recognise that the compliments and the insults are very surface level”. Nevertheless, he shared that remembering the positive interactions he has had helps counter the impact of the negative ones.

⁹³ See *Optimising dating app profiles* (§ 5.3.4.3.1, p. 124) and *Posting on NSFW alt accounts to get validation* (§ 5.3.4.2.3, p. 119)

Many participants described these shifts in perspective occurring as they matured. For example, P6 described how he was more caught up in self-comparison and engaging in a culture of idealised presentations when he was younger and the positive impact his world-view expanding has had:

“I think it’s the the way that I engage with things now. Um, you know, I wasn’t, you know, innocent back then too, I had the same type of, you know, I would only talk to someone if they had abs or something to that effect. And then I grew up in a household that was very pro-white, and not involved in other other cultures. And I would kind of, you know, try to stick within Caucasians sort of thing. But I think the more that I got older, and I engage with the different people in real life, and as well as online, a lot of that seemed to dissipate over time.” [P6]

For a number of participants, this new perspective on their social platform interactions related to feeling more secure in themselves and thus less reliant on external validation. For example, P23 shared that he now uses an Instagram account just with close friends whereas when he felt less secure in himself he was more concerned with building a following. Similarly, P19 found that by presenting less filtered presentations on his Close Friends story on Instagram, it helped him become more accepting of himself⁹⁴. As P4 described:

“I definitely compare myself to a lot of men who have seen on like, social media, who were sort of like the picture perfect idea of what a gay men should be. But as I’ve gotten older, I started realizing, why should I care? Like, it’s not, like, I shouldn’t be like, comparing myself to someone who I don’t know or who’s living a completely different life to me, like, I should just be focusing on myself, like self love, and really be content with who I am, how I look. And pretty much like that, like, I can’t really compare... I shouldn’t really compare myself.” [P4]

Participants also described peer support as helpful for moving beyond self-comparison⁹⁵. P16 shared how talking to his friends about his insecurities led to him realising that many of them were in a similar situation and they did not have it as together as their social platform presences would indicate. Similarly, P20 recounted how seeking advice from others in the community helped him moved beyond narrow perspectives of how to be a queer man and to instead focus on being himself.

Some participants also became more comfortable in themselves with the help of affirming content they saw on social platforms, as we discuss in *Becoming more accepting of oneself based on online content* (§ 5.3.1.1.2, p. 81).

⁹⁴ See *Being more authentic with trusted audiences* (§ 5.3.5.1, p. 131) for more discussion of using Close Friends for more authentic presentations.

⁹⁵ See *Using social platforms to post about things that are difficult or unpleasant* (§ 5.3.5.2, p. 138) for more discussion of peer support.

5.3.5.3.4 Posting (or not) more intentionally Multiple participants shared concerns about the negative impacts that seeking validation on social platforms could have ⁹⁶.

“The addictive component of it, it’s, I think, very easy to end up seeking that external validation, which develops a bit more of an external locus of control, whereas and I think that that’s a dangerous thing, this whole idea that you’re getting validation and self-esteem from a source, which you have no control over, they could disappear at any point in time, they might not be invested in your well-being.” [P14]

Participants also described ways they have resisted engaging in the “toxic culture” they saw by being intentional about the content that they share. For some, this was about sharing more authentic self-presentations or not posting things to seek validation or to curate a certain aesthetic. For example, P10 changed the type of content that he shares:

“I still post but it’s not really as many selfies and gratifying posts and validating posts because that validation I saw to be superficial sometimes and It always became a contest when a gay person posts something as opposed to other gay people. And it was just a whole one up and belittlement just didn’t like that. So I don’t post as many selfies, but I post things that are more meaningful and things that I think the world really does need to see.” [P10]

Similarly, P21 talked about his intentional refusal to use any photo editing apps that would alter his appearance. P1 described how he used to create a “certain aesthetic” on his social platform profiles but that he has stopped caring about doing that. Part of this is a shift to posting less for validation – he shared that these days when he posts it is “more for [himself] than it is for anyone else”.

A number of participants described how they rarely post on social platforms. P3 described feeling pressure to be actively posting when he was younger before realising that he does not have to. Although he might sometimes share a photo of his dog, he said he does not “have anything that I really feel like I have to share with the world at the moment”. He sees his lack of posting as helping him avoid having to present in a certain way.

“I found that in terms of my perception of other people, and also myself was a lot more accurate. I think that it’s... you’re a lot less conscious of like thinking about other people, I think it’s a lot easier to kind of be on track in terms of your life and what you want to do and your own goals. I feel like you’re less influenced by external factors, I found that in terms of thinking of like, what I want to do next year in university, I found that there was a lot more clarity, like, even like just one or two weeks after kind of cutting that out.” [P13]

⁹⁶ See *Curating an attractive image* (§ 5.3.4, p. 107) for discussion of how participants did this.

5.3.6 Finding and interacting with peers

In this overarching theme, we describe how participants sought out and met peers on social platforms. The first theme starts by detailing the different places where participants met other queer young men. While, as we describe in this first theme, participants met peers across a wide range of platforms, most of their descriptions of their experiences focused on dating apps. As a result, the rest of the themes we describe in this overarching theme describe their experiences on dating apps. The five themes that comprise this overarching theme are:

- *Meeting other queer and trans young men* (§ 5.3.6.1, p. 145).
- *Using a spectrum of dating apps* (§ 5.3.6.2, p. 151).
- *Matching processes can improve interactions but reduce engagement* (§ 5.3.6.3, p. 155).
- *Navigating mismatched expectations on dating apps and issues around consent* (§ 5.3.6.4, p. 158).
- *Building rapport, trust and relationships with people from dating apps* (§ 5.3.6.5, p. 162).

5.3.6.1 Meeting other queer and trans young men

In this theme, we explore how participants met other queer and trans young men on social platforms. We do this across four sub-themes:

- *Finding communities they otherwise wouldn't have found* (§ 5.3.6.1.1, p. 145).
- *Finding community and peer support in online groups* (§ 5.3.6.1.2, p. 146).
- *Finding community and peer support in more loosely defined sub-communities* (§ 5.3.6.1.3, p. 147).
- *Using dating apps as a way to find peers* (§ 5.3.6.1.4, p. 149).

5.3.6.1.1 Finding communities they otherwise wouldn't have found

Overwhelmingly, participants described how beneficial it was to find peers on social platforms who shared similar experiences – often they shared how it had helped them feel more comfortable in themselves and more connected to community. This was often through direct interactions and peer support from others but could also be through more passive observation of communities they found. This was especially important for when participants were younger and first starting to find peers, and vital for those who did not have access to queer communities in the physical realm, for example due to living outside the city or in a religious community. Many emphasised that social platforms helped them find community that they otherwise would not have found.

“Especially when I was younger, it was like, I didn't know that many LGBT people. And when I was just like, coming to, you know, figuring out what I was and all that. It was it created, like a sense of community that I wasn't able to get at school and like with people in real life, because I was too young to go out and meet random people. So yeah, it

brought a broader sense of community into my life when I was younger. And it still does, I guess, to this day” [P22]

“There isn’t really anything out in Southwest Sydney out towards [suburb redacted]. So to me, it was only the communities that I could access which was online, because I didn’t have the freedom of just getting on a bus or train because of my own circumstances, and then going into the city.” [P6]

Similarly, social platforms could provide ways to meet others for those who did not fit into the dominant queer communities. For example, P2 described difficulty meeting people as a result of avoiding social venues that revolve around alcohol such as pubs.

5.3.6.1.2 Finding community and peer support in online groups Online groups and communities were a common way that participants described finding peers. Multiple participants described how they were part of queer groups for their university or workplace. Through these groups they could keep up to date with social events that were happening as well as any queer related news. Similarly, a number talked about being part of groups for “gaymers”⁹⁷. Both P16 and P17 talked about a local group where they could keep up to date on happenings and interact with others in the local community while P13 described being part of a Reddit community:

“There’s even like a gaming community, which is like, spelt with like a y, which is like, it’s all about gaming, but it’s, um, ‘gayming’. Because [mainstream groups are] so dominated by predominantly kind of like rich Western boys, it can be a very toxic place for underrepresented communities, like the queer community or like women in general. So like, the gayming community is, is just like a safe space for all kinds of gaymers to kind of like, have everything that the gaming community has without kind of worrying of like being like, swept away by expressing queerness.” [P13]

Online groups could also be a way to find community with minorities within the LGBTQ+ community. For example, P16 described how affirming it was to find a group for LGBTQ+ Christians. As he described, it can be awkward to talk about his faith with people in the queer community. Similarly, before he had widely disclosed his queerness, he was reluctant to acknowledge it to others in his religious community. So the Facebook group provided a place where he could find others at the intersection of these two identities and from whom he found peer support. Similarly, P18 described how being part of a local Facebook group for bisexuals had helped him find peers that he otherwise would not have met.

While many described the positives of being part of such online groups, some

⁹⁷ A common term for gay people who game

expressed how they were mostly passive observers. For example, P17 shared that he finds it stressful to interact with new people. Even if they did not directly participate some described how it was still beneficial to see what was happening. For example, P3 found that many of the people he saw in online queer groups were older than him and this stopped him from interacting but he still liked seeing what was happening. Engagement with groups could also change over time, especially if participants developed larger networks of queer friends and did not need to rely on them anymore to interact with peers.

Facebook and Reddit were the most mentioned platforms by participants when it came to online groups. It is worth noting that although many participants described Facebook as a place where they did not feel comfortable sharing their queerness⁹⁸, many of the groups that they talked about using were hosted on the platform. Facebook affords various levels of privacy where content and interactions within groups are visible only to members, and if set to “secret”, even the existence of the group can be hidden. This means that participants could be involved in such groups without people they wanted to conceal their queerness from being part of the audience.

Some participants shared that they had sought out queer groups while others said that Facebook had suggested them. In some cases, participants described being added by friends who thought they would want to join (the only way to be added to a “secret group”). This was the case when P16 joined the Christian LGBTQ+ group he described. When he first came out to some of his friends, one of them mentioned to someone involved in the group that he was looking for some support and he got added.

5.3.6.1.3 Finding community and peer support in more loosely defined sub-communities Participants also described how they met peers through more loosely defined sub-communities that they were part of.

A number of participants talked about how they had found community and friends through Tumblr. As P6 described, much of the content on people’s Tumblr profiles was content they reshared, or “reblogged” in Tumblr lingo, and it was easy to interact with people who reblogged similar content. Such descriptions of Tumblr providing participants ways to connect to others with shared interests were common. P15 also described how he had attended social gatherings organised through Tumblr, and how they had helped him meet openly queer people face to face for the first time. Unfortunately, almost all of the participants who mentioned using Tumblr commented on the way that LGBTQ+ communities on the platform were destroyed when NSFW content was banned. Many described how they had not found similar communities elsewhere to make up for the loss. Both P9 and P10 commented on how wide-reaching the ban was in impacting content they saw as more artistic and how big an impact it had on the platform. When asked why he stopped using Tumblr, P10 replied:

⁹⁸ See *Concealing being queer or trans to avoid negative experiences* (§ 5.3.2.1, p. 89).

“Because it was a very explicit place, but it was also very artistic explicit. Some of the content on there wasn’t just – it was soft core porn in a very artistic way. Because as soon as it went so did everyone, everyone stopped using and so no one was posting, and so it was just very bland content.” [P10]

P11 and P13 both shared how they had befriended people they had found in comment sections. P11 described how he often interacts with people in the comment sections of creators that he follows and tries to befriend people who are also in the sub-communities he is in. Similarly, P13 described befriending someone he got on with in a Reddit comment thread.

“Often, with certain, I guess social media influencers who are queer identifying, there’d often be kind of offshoots of other people, smaller accounts on their platforms, who would want to say like launch small posts or comments sections, where you could find people with mutual experiences or interests, and then interact and build friendships from that. It was definitely a really instrumental tool in kind of making contact with people who were having or had had similar experiences to mine. So it really helped me with my sort of personal understanding.” [P11]

Having mutual connections could also be a way to find peers. A number of participants described how they might interact with people on Instagram with whom they shared mutuals (mutual connections). Both P11 and P20 talked about striking up conversations with people they had mutuals with and then using that initial interaction to try to develop an in-person friendship. Attraction could also play a part. P9 shared that if he sees his friends post a story with someone and he finds them “visually incredible”, he might reach out directly to them. P16 also noted that it is common for queer men to think “I find you very attractive, so I’m going to add you on Facebook even though we’ve never talked”. Similarly, P18 shared that seeing he had mutuals on Instagram with someone he had found on a dating app provided a good opportunity for him to strike up a conversation enquiring about the connection.

“Often, it’s a little awkward in the beginning. And I would usually just kind of shoot them a DM with an inside joke that would relate to both myself, them and the mutual that we have in common, to kind of break the ice, and then from there probably would be more of an in-person social setting, that would further that friendship.” [P11]

NSFW gay Twitter was another place where a number of participants shared that they had found friendship. P16 and P19, both of whom post on NSFW alt Twitter ⁹⁹, described interacting and developing friendships with others on the platform. While P16 described making friends with people globally, he, along with

⁹⁹ See *Posting on NSFW alt accounts to get validation* (§ 5.3.4.2.3, p. 119) for an exploration of how they did this.

others described how it could also be quite localised. As P18 shared, “Twitter is a wonderful resource for meeting other gay people in Sydney”.

5.3.6.1.4 Using dating apps as a way to find peers Many participants shared experiences of using dating apps such as Tinder and Grindr to find their social footing and connections to community. Even if they were not looking for dates or hookups¹⁰⁰, they were a place they could find other queer young men near them and strike up conversations. Some shared how they had downloaded them in periods of loneliness, and many described how a large proportion of their queer friends were people they had met on dating apps. For example, P15 shared:

“Most of my gay friends, the majority of them came from dating apps. If it wasn’t for that, I wouldn’t have friends. Like, how else would I have made...? How would I have met my first boyfriend, if it wasn’t from Grindr? How would I have met my ex if it wasn’t for Tinder? My best friend was on Tinder. And everyone else... I wouldn’t have the people around me that I have right now if it wasn’t for those apps... I don’t think I would be in a safe place at the moment if it wasn’t for those apps, because those people were the ones that, you know, my darkest times where I could meet people, and then be part of a community... thanks to those apps I’m who I am” [P15]

Multiple participants also described how they often developed friendships with people they met on dating apps even if this was not the intention when they first started interacting, for example if they realised there was not interest in a sexual or romantic relationship but they got on well enough to be friends. This could also happen after meeting casually and then realising they had a connection or something in common and wanted to stay in touch. As P5 described, even if he had not had much success looking for friends directly, this was often the case:

“The longer things go and don’t turn into a romantic thing, I think it’s more likely that you end up being friends just because you spend so much time talking and getting to know someone. If you realise that there’s no sexual element, or romantic element, that’s the natural conclusion, that you just become friends.” [P5]

Dating apps could also provide a way to interact with friends or become more connected with people participants had already met. For example, P16 described how he might message someone he has met while out with friends to strike up a conversation. P16 also shared how he often uses Grindr to see which of his friends are nearby if he is having a night out. For P15, dating apps could serve as a way for him to confirm whether people he knew were also queer. For example, he described finding work colleagues on Grindr and how this made him more comfortable talking to them and being open about his queerness.

¹⁰⁰ See *Using a spectrum of dating apps* (§ 5.3.6.2, p. 151) which explores how participants perceived the purposes of each dating app.

A couple of participants described attending in-person events they had found through dating apps they used and how this helped them meet others and find community. P6 shared how he used to go to events organised for users of Scruff and P24 talked about learning of a local kink community through Recon ¹⁰¹.

“Through Recon, I learned that there was some kink social events... [when I got to one of these events for the first time] I was overwhelmed because I knew absolutely no one there, I was completely on my own. I had no connections at all. And you know, to see all the so many guys in their gear and like, it was overwhelming, I will admit it but what really helped was that there were like, you know, some people that took notice of my presence and they happily introduced themselves put up conversations. And then and since then I’ve been a regular member of the [event]... And if it weren’t for Recon, I never would have learned of the [event] and I probably would never have gotten like, you know, I probably never would have gotten into the kink scene right now until much later... it’s introduced me to new experiences that I probably wouldn’t have heard of and it’s a benefit that I see to it” [P24]

Although many participants described how they had used dating apps to find friends, their experiences doing so were not always positive. This was especially the case on Grindr where many described issues around mismatched expectations and consent, as we discuss below ¹⁰². However, P20 shared that this difficulty of finding social connections on Grindr, along with disliking its overtly sexualised culture also had a silver-lining. As he saw it, these negative collective experiences on the app provided an opportunity for “trauma bonding” and made it easier to relate to people he came across who were looking for similar things as him.

People’s perceptions of the purposes of each app could also stop people from using them to find friends. For example, P20 described that although he saw dating apps as a great place to find friends, the focus he saw on other types of connections was off-putting. Similarly, some participants did not want to be on Tinder or Hinge if they were not looking for a serious relationship, even if others saw them as acceptable places to seek friendship ¹⁰³. Relatedly, starting a romantic relationship could affect use of the apps, or the connections they had made on them. For example, P1 described how he had met people he considered friends on Grindr, but that they had stopped talking to him as soon as they got into a relationship. In contrast, P9 described how he maintained such relationships, even if he did stop using the app:

“I’ve stopped using dating apps, that’s probably the biggest thing [that’s changed since I’ve been in a relationship]. Grindr was a huge part of my

¹⁰¹ For more discussion of these apps see *Recon, Scruff and other apps as alternatives to Grindr* (§ 5.3.6.2.3, p. 154).

¹⁰² See *Navigating mismatched expectations on dating apps and issues around consent* (§ 5.3.6.4, p. 158).

¹⁰³ See *Tinder and Hinge as places to find dates, friendship and long-term partners* (§ 5.3.6.2.2, p. 153) where we discuss this in more detail.

personality now that’s gone... And I still have [friends from there] on other social media platforms and stuff... I think it’s just the sex component of it... It wasn’t even because my partner told me to get off it, we just kinda both did.” [P9]

On the other hand, P3 described how he finds people on Grindr that are in open-relationships tend to be nicer and more likely to be looking for friends.

Some participants also described their desire for dating apps that were more focused on finding friends. For example, as we showed above, P1 envisioned an Ideal Social Platform that was, “like a dating app but for friends” only (see Figure 5.18, p. 102). As he described when talking about his idea for “Friendspace”, social platform algorithms on platforms like TikTok have profiled his interests to show him content ¹⁰⁴, and he thought similar technology could be used to match him with potential friends. Similarly, P5 envisioned “PAL”, writing that “there aren’t many platonic ways to make friends for queer people and it’s really isolating” (See Figure 5.19, p. 103). As we describe in the following theme, many participants had strong opinions about the purposes of each app that shaped how they approached them.

5.3.6.2 Using a spectrum of dating apps

For many participants, they saw the purposes of each dating app as falling on a spectrum between those supporting more casual and hookup based interactions, and those more focused on longer term connections. As P23 described:

“If I put them on a spectrum, and like hookups was on one end, and like relationship was on the other, it would go Grindr, Tinder and Hinge pretty evenly spread out... I think the way that people use them, and the kind of personas that people construct on them are very different... they just all have very specific visual expectations, and the kind of language that exists on each one is unique to the platform.” [P23]

Participants often compared their experiences between apps across this spectrum, their perceptions of each app defined in relation to others. This was particularly evident when P5 and P21 described the differences they saw in how Tinder is used by “straight people”.

“[for] straight friends that I’ve talked to, Tinder is their version of Grindr which is confusing for me but that’s because we have Grindr and there’s that availability of a sexual outlet that’s quick and easy. Whereas straight people don’t have that. So Tinder for them is a lot more sexualised and a lot more casual.” [P5]

Participants expectations of the apps also extended to the ways that others would interact with them. For example, P5 and P19 both recounted being shocked when

¹⁰⁴ We discuss how participants perceived content recommendation algorithms in *Navigating algorithmic suggestions* (§ 5.3.1.3, p. 86).

others on Tinder have “messed [them] as if they’re messaging [them] on Grindr” [P19].

It was also common for participants to talk about using multiple dating apps simultaneously and for their use to vary dependant on what they were looking for at the time.

“I had [Tinder and Grindr] at the same time. And I had Grindr longer. And you know, not to be crude about it. But Grindr can serve those extra purposes that Tinder can’t... I had different intentions that I could get on there I couldn’t get on Tinder. But when I wanted to specifically say, right, maybe I’ll find somebody maybe I’d like to find somebody. Then yes, possibly. That’s that’s when that need came about.” [P18]

Across three sub-themes, we describe at high level the ways that participants perceived the purposes and cultures of each of the dating apps that they talked about:

- *Grindr as a place for hookups* (§ 5.3.6.2.1, p. 152).
- *Tinder and Hinge as places to find dates, friendship and long-term partners* (§ 5.3.6.2.2, p. 153).
- *Recon, Scruff and other apps as alternatives to Grindr* (§ 5.3.6.2.3, p. 154).

5.3.6.2.1 Grindr as a place for hookups Grindr was the dating app that participants spoke about the most and for some, joining it seemed like a rite of passage. Overwhelmingly, participants described Grindr as being a place primarily centred around hookups. Generally, participants were open-minded about the kinds of interactions they would have on Grindr but many described keeping measured expectations that they were more likely to find people who wanted to hookup. For example, P18 shared:

“I think every app has its purpose. And I think there’s this differentiation, which is now very obvious in the queer community. You know, the Grindr is, yes, you can find a boyfriend, but it’s far more likely that you’re going to find a hookup.” [P18]

A number of participants talked about the ways that they used Grindr to find hookups and casual connections. This included participants who also talked about wanting more social or long-term connections. For example, P9 shared:

“I’ve been open to like, just having fun or, or, like meeting friends and networking and stuff like that. So I feel like I’ve had fairly good experiences, but a lot of it has just been casual” [P9]

Often, although not always, participants described the highly sexualised culture of Grindr in a negative way. A number of participants described joining the app and using it only briefly before deleting it due to negative experiences. Some decided

that, based on Grindr’s reputation alone, they did not want to use the app¹⁰⁵.

On the other hand, some participants appreciated how upfront people on Grindr could be about looking for hookups.

“I like that [Grindr] feels very honest. I feel like no one is really pretending on it. So like everyone has this baseline understanding of what they’re there for and what they expect and what they want.” [P1]

Some participants commented on the way Grindr profiles have a number of predefined fields. P17 found that when people chose to fill them out, it helped him know “whether it’s worth talking to them”. He also noted that Grindr allows people to link to their profiles on other accounts – while Tinder allows linking one’s profile to an Instagram account, it shows images without providing a way to link to the account or revealing its handle. This could be useful for verifying someone’s identity as we explore *Avoiding “toxic” people, catfishes and bots* (§ 5.3.6.5.1, p. 162). A number of participants used this ability to link to their other social platform accounts, including NSFW accounts, as we discuss in *Linking to other social platforms from dating apps* (§ 5.3.4.3.2, p. 128). On the other hand, and as we explore in *The need to conform to the image of an ideal queer man* (§ 5.3.3.1, p. 95), the structured fields and statistics on Grindr could also be used to discriminate against people who do not fit the dominant ideals around how people ought to look.

Despite participants’ perceptions of Grindr as a place for hookups, many used the app to find peers and community. We explore the ways they did this in *Using dating apps as a way to find peers* (§ 5.3.6.1.4, p. 149).

5.3.6.2.2 Tinder and Hinge as places to find dates, friendship and long-term partners Most participants described Tinder and Hinge as much more oriented towards dating, although some participants also saw Tinder as a place to find “queer connections and friends” [P19].

“When I’m on Tinder, I expect the people that I match with to really fall into dating, friends or something more substantial.” [P5]

Participants generally considered Hinge to be slightly more relationship focused and to have higher quality profiles compared to Tinder. Some participants attributed the increased quality of profiles on Hinge to the more structured approach it requires when users create profiles. P2 explained that this meant Hinge is his preferred dating app:

“Because you have to have multiple photos. And you you also have to, you know have I think it’s three questions. You have to answer and write a bit about yourself. Um people put more effort into it. Whereas like Tinder people put like no effort into that and yeah, Hinge just like Tinder

¹⁰⁵ We explore such negative experiences in *Navigating mismatched expectations on dating apps and issues around consent* (§ 5.3.6.4, p. 158) and *Wrestling with the pressure to conform to the image of an ideal queer man* (§ 5.3.3, p. 94).

is you know, you have to match to be able to talk to someone. Yeah, Grindr is just like, you know, creepy blank profiles messaging you.” [P2]

Similarly, P15 noted that Hinge is more about getting to know people whereas he sees Tinder as more superficially centred on initial attraction to the pictures shown in the stack. Echoing this, P23 shared:

“Yeah, but it’s more personal on Hinge. Like, and then it’s personal, but still a bit promiscuous on Tinder. And then there’s no, almost no personal information on Grindr, but it’s quite promiscuous.” [P23]

Compared to Grindr, many participants saw Tinder and Hinge as supporting more pleasant interactions with others. Participants attributed much of this to the different interaction styles of the apps, which we explore in *Matching processes can improve interactions but reduce engagement* (§ 5.3.6.3, p. 155). Similarly, some participants appreciated that Tinder and Hinge do not support sharing images in chats which makes it impossible to receive unsolicited explicit content, a common problem on Grindr¹⁰⁶. P15 also suggested Tinder has many more people on it because of how toxic Grindr can be.

While the increased focus on relationships on Tinder and Hinge could be beneficial depending on what participants were looking for, it could also be intimidating. P24 described how he stopped using Tinder because he was anxious about needing to have a clearer idea of what he was looking for on the app. Similarly, P15 described that he has not interacted with many people on Hinge because he has felt intimidated by how dating focused the app is and has “been too scared to use it”. Along similar lines, P21 did not think it would be healthy to be on Tinder as he had just gone through a break up and was not ready for a relationship.

Participants also noted differences in the way matching works between Tinder and Hinge, as we discuss below¹⁰⁷.

5.3.6.2.3 Recon, Scruff and other apps as alternatives to Grindr Some participants shared their experiences using other dating apps targeted at queer men such as Recon¹⁰⁸ and Scruff¹⁰⁹. While Grindr is the most mainstream app, as participants described, these alternatives are often targeted to specific groups within the queer community. Similar to Grindr, participants described their main purpose as to find hookups. However, they could be more accepting of those who do not

¹⁰⁶ See *Navigating mismatched expectations on dating apps and issues around consent* (§ 5.3.6.4, p. 158) where this is detailed.

¹⁰⁷ See *Matching processes can improve interactions but reduce engagement* (§ 5.3.6.3, p. 155).

¹⁰⁸ Recon is a people nearby social platform and bills itself as “the world’s largest network for guys into fetish” (T101 Limited, 2023)

¹⁰⁹ Scruff is a “a geosocial network targeted primarily at bears (and their admirers)” Roth, 2014, pp. 2113. Although Roth (2014, pp. 2124) problematizes the idea of the “Scruff guy” the app targets, he notes that “Scruff emerged in reaction to the one-size-fits-all approach to gay geosocial networking of services like Grindr by targeting a (generally) older, larger-bodied, more hirsute, or more masculine demographic”.

conform to the image of an ideal queer man ¹¹⁰. For example, P6 described how he started using Scruff after experiencing targeted harassment about his weight on Grindr, before eventually finding Recon. P21 described having tried to use all the different dating apps, including Scruff, but described finding them “useless” compared to Grindr. He also mentioned Sniffies ¹¹¹ but commented that it seemed “a bit much” for him.

“In terms of Grindr, I think for me, it’s all a lot of the same type of people. And then on Recon it’s kind of like more of a unique experience where you have people with different interests. It’s more of a fetish type of website that’s targeted to all different types of groups. And you’re able to kind of segment, what you’re interested into, you’re able to engage in certain, you know, activities or online forums that are provided. Unlike the other type of apps, you’re able to personalize your interests more... that’s primarily what I prefer. I find that on that app in particular, there’s a lot less prejudice and bias other people that just don’t fit the whole mainstream, you know, gay stereotypes.” [P6]

The focus on kink and fetish on Recon could also shape the ways the people interact on the app. For example, P24 found that people on Recon were more mindful of consent compared to on Grindr where it would often be overlooked.

“In the fetish community, boundaries are always they’re always emphasized you’ve always got to make sure there’s always going to be an agreement between both parties about what’s gonna happen, and like, you know, what kinks gonna be performed, like, there’s got to be a mutual agreement or otherwise, if there isn’t, that can’t happen at all.” [P24]

However, this is not necessarily always the case, P6 described how similar to Grindr, people often started conversations by sending unsolicited pictures or overtly sexual messages that made him uncomfortable ¹¹². On the other hand, P6 found that Recon was better at preventing bot accounts and did better profile verification than Grindr.

5.3.6.3 Matching processes can improve interactions but reduce engagement

In this theme we describe the way participants saw the matching processes, or lack thereof, on dating apps and the way that they impacted their interactions with people. We do this across three sub-themes:

¹¹⁰ See *Wrestling with the pressure to conform to the image of an ideal queer man* (§ 5.3.3, p. 94) for more detail.

¹¹¹ Sniffies describes itself as “a modern, map-based, meetup app for gay, bi, and curious guys” and says that it “has quickly become the hottest, fastest-growing cruising platform for guys looking for casual hookups in their area” Sniffies LLC, n.d.

¹¹² See *Finding dating apps uncomfortably sexualised or overwhelming* (§ 5.3.6.4.1, p. 159), where we discuss this behaviour.

- *Matching as a way to avoid negative interactions* (§ 5.3.6.3.1, p. 156).
- *Matches often do not go anywhere* (§ 5.3.6.3.2, p. 157).
- *Not having a matching process can allow for more dynamic interactions* (§ 5.3.6.3.3, p. 158).

5.3.6.3.1 Matching as a way to avoid negative interactions A number of participants contrasted the different paradigms for starting new interactions between Grindr and that of Tinder – commenting on how they saw it shaping their experiences. On Grindr, you are presented with a grid of nearby users and you can message anyone. On Tinder and Hinge, you see a stack of profiles and have to decide whether to like or dislike each person one at a time. To message, both you and the other person have to have liked each other, causing a “match” and allowing you to message them. A number of participants saw this “matching” process as beneficial. They noted that it means only people they have a mutual attraction to can interact with them, something that may prevent many of the unwanted messages they receive on Grindr. It also allows users to set filters for people who can see their profile and interact. For P8 who found being messaged by people in their 30s and 40s confronting, he liked that on Tinder he could filter the visibility of his profile to people closer to his age.

“[On Tinder] you can choose who you want to and who not to talk to, like, if you match with them or not. Whereas with like Grindr, it’s like anyone who’s anyone can talk to you. And like that, that’s sort of like an unsettling feeling. Like, you know, anyone can like want to talk to you and continuously message you like, I don’t, I don’t like that even in the slightest. So that’s why I feel more security on Tinder than on Grindr.”

[P4]

A notable difference between Tinder and Hinge at the time this research was conducted was that the latter would also suggest profiles it deemed as “most compatible”. Although few participants commented on the feature, P15 created a Moments worth screenshotting card describing the time it suggested his ex as the most compatible person for him and wrote that it made him feel heartbroken (see Figure 5.38).

Some participants also commented on the ways that having to match before interacting forces people to have higher quality profiles. As P7 noted, unlike on Grindr where you can just message someone, on Tinder “you kind of have to present yourself in a way that will be appealing to other people”. Similarly, P17 shared Tinder is “much more about quality, not quantity” compared to Grindr because people’s profiles needed “sufficient quality to pass the interest barrier on Tinder”. However, this could also relate to his different intentions for the app, adding that “whereas on Grindr, it’s like, you got a dick, nice, let me waste your time for a while”.

On the other hand, a number of participants noted the impact of matching

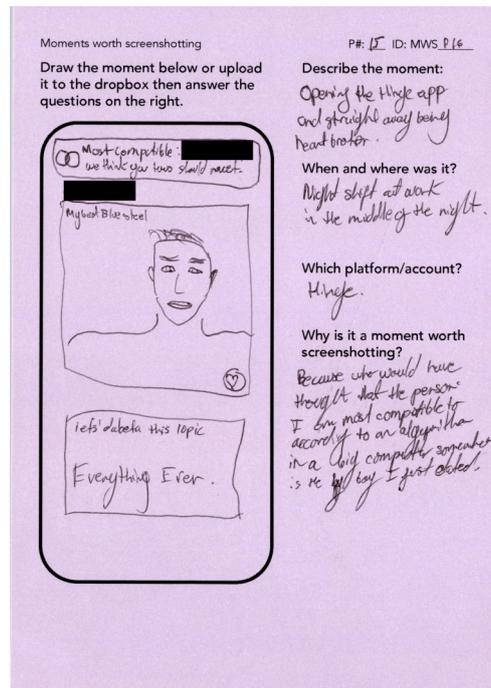


Figure 5.38: A Moments Worth Screenshotting card P15 created for Hinge.

processes on the amount of effort and time it takes to begin interacting with someone and noted how it shapes their interactions. For example, P3 described the matching process on Tinder as a core reason people look for relationships on the app, “it’s a bit too much effort to go to if you’re just looking for a hookup”.

5.3.6.3.2 Matches often do not go anywhere While matching with someone on a dating app arguably signifies some level of mutual interest, many participants complained that matches often did not lead to conversations. Even if participants did end up talking to people on Tinder, many noted that these interactions were often fleeting or died out. Participants provided various theories as to causes. P14 described that he had spoken to many people he had matched with on Hinge but that it did not often lead to meeting in-person. He thought that this was likely because dating apps make it too easy to talk a large pool of potential suitors and keep people in a “holding pattern” until the conversation eventually dies out. On the other hand, P10 thought that people might often be too anxious to message, or share his perspective that the app was “a bit fake”.

This echoed what P16 shared about his interactions with others. He described that he does not always have the confidence to message first and that when he does, he often does not hear back. If he does, he shared that his conversations on Tinder “tend to be a bit small talky and it doesn’t really go anywhere”. A number of participants admitted to ghosting others on dating apps or being “terrible at replying” in the case of P17. P10 admitted that he often finds himself “not responding because they haven’t really said anything engaging”. As P5 described,

sometimes he would “like” someone on Tinder without the intention of interacting beyond matching ¹¹³:

“You match with someone that you’re unsure of but you want to see if you’ll match. Then you match and you’re like, okay, cool. Then I’ll just leave it because it’s not – I didn’t actually want to pursue anything, but I was just curious.” [P5]

A couple participants commented on the matching process on Hinge where users are encouraged to write a message in response to a specific part of someone’s profile to “like” them. Unlike Tinder, Hinge immediately shows if someone has liked you. P5 appreciated this noting that there was less emphasis on swiping, reducing the time to start interacting, and that often they would have said something that could be used to start the conversation. On the other hand, P7 did not like how structured interactions on Hinge could be.

“I had a brief foray into like, Hinge, but that was, that was intense, like way too wild. Like this whole replying to photos and commenting on... I was like, just leave me alone.” [P7]

5.3.6.3.3 Not having a matching process can allow for more dynamic interactions Many participants described Grindr as being more dynamic and engaging due to being able to message anyone and the grid view. Some participants also preferred the location-based grid model of Grindr which shows people in order of distance because it makes it less likely to interact with someone far away. By not centring connections between users around a matching event, Grindr may also have lower stakes for individual interactions. For example, P16 described how the location-based nature of Grindr allows for the possibility of reaching out to someone again if they are nearby. Being able to be messaged by anyone could also be a positive. P10 shared that he likes going on the app because people just talk to him. P16 also shared that he is “open to chatting with just about anyone” on Grindr and open to friendships that result even if he is “pickier when it comes to sex and dates”. However, as noted above, some participants shared that this also allows people to send unwanted and negative messages.

5.3.6.4 Navigating mismatched expectations on dating apps and issues around consent

While participants described many positive experiences on dating apps, for example using them to find peers, as we discuss above ¹¹⁴, negative experiences often resulted from mismatched expectations between them and others. This theme consists of two sub-themes:

- *Finding dating apps uncomfortably sexualised or overwhelming* (§ 5.3.6.4.1,

¹¹³ As we discuss in *Optimising dating app profiles* (§ 5.3.4.3.1, p. 124), he and other participants described using dating apps as a game to gain validation, not necessarily to connect with people.

¹¹⁴ See *Using dating apps as a way to find peers* (§ 5.3.6.1.4, p. 149).

p. 159).

- *Receiving unsolicited NSFW content and being pressured to sext* (§ 5.3.6.4.2, p. 160).

5.3.6.4.1 Finding dating apps uncomfortably sexualised or

overwhelming Many participants lamented how sexualised their interactions on dating apps were. This was particularly the case on Grindr, which participants saw as having a culture that centred the app’s purpose as a place for finding hookups ¹¹⁵, however, some also noted that this could happen on other platforms too. For example, P6 noted that he experiences similar behaviour to what is described in this theme on Recon ¹¹⁶. Some participants also highlighted Grindr’s increased anonymity compared to other dating apps as contributing to anti-social behaviour on the platform ¹¹⁷. For example, P22 described:

“I think [Tinder] is a bit better for interactions because I feel like on Grindr, people are... just like because it is such a like a faceless app, people just feel like you can’t see them, they can just say whatever they want.” [P22]

It was common for participants to receive unwanted sexual advances or messages that made them feel uncomfortable. As P22 described, “some people really just like, will open the conversation with like, the weirdest shit... it just stays in your mind”. Similarly, P19 commented:

“Grindr, it’s like, straight up, it’s like, do you want to do this? Like, you know, I can do this to you right now. Like, it’s very very abrupt, very in your face. And a lot of the time, I just don’t even reply because I don’t have the energy to formulate a response.” [P19]

Some participants commented on the way that receiving unwanted sexual or otherwise creepy messages is normalised in the community. For example, P21 shared:

“Obviously, in the community, it’s not a weird thing sometimes for people to message you asking you to do things for money. Some people would find that creepy, but that’s kind of again, normalized. Most of my mates have had those sorts of experiences.” [P21]

As many participants described, looking for things other than hookups on Grindr could lead to negative experiences. While the app has profile options to indicate that one is looking for other things (e.g., dates or friends), many described how it could be difficult to find others who were interested in this. As a number of participants also commented, many people do not read profiles and may, in any case, ignore or make assumptions about what they are looking for. For example,

¹¹⁵ See *Grindr as a place for hookups* (§ 5.3.6.2.1, p. 152) where this is described.

¹¹⁶ See *Recon, Scruff and other apps as alternatives to Grindr* (§ 5.3.6.2.3, p. 154) where this is discussed.

¹¹⁷ We also describe this as part of *Dating app experiences reinforce negative ideals* (§ 5.3.3.1.4, p. 99).

P21 described how someone would be “a little bit naive” to look for dates on Grindr “because people aren’t going to do the right thing by you”. Even if profiles presented themselves as looking for more than hookups, this did not always match the reality of the way they interacted. For example, P3 described:

“Even for a lot of people with on their profiles that kind of says that they are looking for things that are more meaningful, it always, not always, but most of the time ends up kind of being more of a one off anyway.” [P3]

Many participants described deleting Grindr as a result of negative experiences on the app. For example, P11 shared:

“I only had [Grindr] for about a few hours... Nothing really came of it except for many, many, many explicit photos, which I really wish I could unsee... [I deleted it because] I kept getting guys, my dad’s age asking to have sex with me. Yeah, I was like, you could be my father. Blocked!” [P11]

As we discuss in the next sub-theme, many participants described similar issues around non-consensual sharing of NSFW content on social platforms.

5.3.6.4.2 Receiving unsolicited NSFW content and being pressured to sext

As we discuss in this sub-theme, many participants described issues around consent related to receiving unsolicited NSFW content, and feeling pressured to send it. For example, many described receiving unsolicited explicit pictures on Grindr and talked about how normalised it is on the platform. Most described this negatively and while some described how this caused them to delete the app, others were resigned to it. For example, P3 shared:

“I used to kind of get annoyed by it. But I think now just it’s happened so much it’s just kind of like, yeah, I just kind of become numb to it now a little bit.” [P3]

While some dating apps, such as Grindr, provide a profile option to describe whether one wants to receive NSFW pictures¹¹⁸, as we discuss in the previous theme, participants felt that their profiles were often ignored beyond the photos they included. Some participants also described how they thought people interpreted their profiles as an invitation to send unsolicited pictures. For example, P16 shared:

“I know there are a lot of people who will just straight up send you a naked picture of themselves and expect you to be okay with that. Especially with me being so open about my sexuality and my body, it sometimes gives people the wrong impression, especially when I have my [NSFW] Twitter linked in my Grindr.” [P16]

¹¹⁸ Grindr provides an “Accepts NSFW pics” profile field and one can select “Do Not Show”, “Never”, “Not At First” or “Yes Please”.

Snapchat was another platform where participants described receiving unsolicited explicit images. It was common for participants to add people from dating apps on Snapchat ¹¹⁹, and some described how those they added could see this as an invitation to send unsolicited pictures. A number of participants described that even when communicated that they did not want to receive such images, they still received them. For example, P16 recounted:

“There was another guy who, you know, I specifically said to him when I gave him my Snapchat, ‘this is personal and I’m not going to send nudes on here’. And he said, ‘that’s fine’. And we added each other on Snapchat, and then he proceeded to send me nudes.” [P16]

Some participants also emphasised the image-based nature of talking on Snapchat as making conversations more prone to becoming sexual even if they did not want this. For example, P5 shared:

“The fact that [on Snapchat] it is a chat that relies heavily on pictures, I think also leads to a greater incentive and also a peer-pressuring of sending explicit photos. The fact that you can do it so easily and with the assumption that it’s going to disappear, I think that absolutely leads to the ease of pornography.” [P5]

As a number of participants described, declining to engage in sexual activity, whether that was sharing explicit pictures or meeting in-person for sex, could lead to being ignored or becoming the target of abuse or harassment. As P5 described, sending nudes “has become a part of the culture that if you don’t participate, you won’t get anything or won’t be interacted with”. He shared that he often asks himself “will this person stop talking to me if I don’t send these pictures?”. Similarly, P3 shared that people often assume he is okay with receiving explicit images and how communicating that he is not can lead to people ghosting him.

“As long as I kind of mention, like, ‘oh I’m not really looking for that’, then they seem to be okay. There have been a few times though where like, as soon as I’ve kind of shown that I’m not interested in their nudes it’s just like a straight, they just kind of like, end the conversation there.” [P3]

However, it should be noted that some participants, even if it was not what they were looking for, did not necessarily mind receiving unsolicited explicit pictures. For example, P9 shared:

“[In Sydney] everyone is just sending pictures. It’s like, it’s no, hello. It’s ridiculous! ...I don’t mind, I think I have a... I feel like I’m fairly sexual. I don’t mind. If that’s all they get from the encounter it doesn’t make me feel... I don’t feel bad about sexualizing myself or anything like that. And I think I’ve got like a good outlook on sex as well. So I feel like I’m

¹¹⁹ See *Building rapport, trust and relationships with people from dating apps* (§ 5.3.6.5, p. 162).

totally fine, if that's the only thing they want. But yeah, I think sometimes it is nicer to maybe say hello, but to each their own power to them. If that's all they're looking for, then go for it." [P9]

In the following section, we describe how participants tried to build rapport and trust with people from dating apps.

5.3.6.5 Building rapport, trust and relationships with people from dating apps

In the previous theme, we explore many of the issues that participants encountered when interacting with others on dating apps. In this theme, we explore the strategies participants described using to maintain their safety and privacy while developing relationships with people they met on the apps. We do this across three sub-themes which address different, although sometimes overlapping, stages:

- *Avoiding “toxic” people, catfishes and bots* (§ 5.3.6.5.1, p. 162).
- *Assessing compatibility and getting to know people better* (§ 5.3.6.5.2, p. 164).
- *Moving from online to in-person* (§ 5.3.6.5.3, p. 167).

5.3.6.5.1 Avoiding “toxic” people, catfishes and bots Many participants described strategies they used to filter out accounts on dating apps to avoid negative experiences. Often, this was to disengage with people who had mismatched expectations¹²⁰, but as we also discuss in this sub-theme, to avoid fake accounts.

Participants described a number of things they looked out for when deciding to interact with someone, and this varied depending on what they were looking for. For example, P3, who described finding hookups “meaningless”, avoids anyone on Grindr who says they are just looking for sex. Often, participants described ignoring or blocking people who sent creepy or overtly sexual messages, especially if that was part of their first message. Similarly, P4 shared that he stops interacting with anyone who he thinks might just want to see his nudes.

As a number of participants pointed out, dating apps often have accounts that are bots, catfishes¹²¹ or otherwise fake accounts. Some described things they looked out for that helped them identify fake accounts, for example, P3 looks out for profile photos that are blurry or cropped strangely. P10 created an Honest Social Platform Ad for Grindr that made light of his experiences with bot accounts on Grindr (see Figure 5.39). As he described, the last time he had Grindr, it was common to receive spam messages asking if he wanted to be a sugar baby. While participants talked about fake accounts as an issue across a number of dating apps, some commented that Grindr was particularly bad for this due to how normal it is for people to not use face pictures and the lack of any profile verification¹²². Beyond

¹²⁰ See *Navigating mismatched expectations on dating apps and issues around consent* (§ 5.3.6.4, p. 158) which describes participants' experiences.

¹²¹ A catfish is “a person who sets up a false personal profile on a social networking site for fraudulent or deceptive purposes” (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, n.d.-a).

¹²² We also discuss participants negative perceptions of anonymity in *Dating app experiences re-*



Figure 5.39: An Honest Social Platform Ad created by P10 for Grindr.

fake accounts, participants sometimes described how people might misrepresent themselves on dating apps. As P10 described, there are many people “pretending they’re younger than they are or people that have highly adapted photos that aren’t really true to who they are”.

Several participants described how they tried to engage people in conversations on dating apps to build up a sense of who they were talking to, and to make sure they were a real person. Often, this was one of the earliest safety strategies participants used when interacting with new people. Usually this started on the original platform, especially for participants such as P1 and P23 who are reluctant to share other platforms. For example, P23 shared:

“With conversation, it’s like oh, okay, well, we’ve been talking for long enough now that I one) don’t think you’re a bot and two) think that you’re like personable enough for me to meet you in person.” [P23]

Similarly, P23 also described how getting people to send enough photos of themselves could convince him that they were who they said they were.

Some participants mentioned profile or ID verification as a positive. For example, P6 described that he feels safer on Recon than other apps because he thinks they require a face picture and check that a generic image has not been used. Similarly, P18, as part of an Ideal Social Platform probe response, envisioned a new dating

inforce negative ideals (§ 5.3.3.1.4, p. 99) and *Finding dating apps uncomfortably sexualised or overwhelming* (§ 5.3.6.4.1, p. 159).

app that he named Honest, partly because of the requirement for ID verification.

For those less concerned about staying anonymous with people they were interacting with on dating apps, adding people on other platforms could be a way to verify their identities. As some participants highlighted, this could alleviate the risk of people using stolen pictures, or “catfishing”. By adding people on other platforms they could either see a more public profile or get the person to send real-time photos to check they were who they said they were. Most commonly this was done with Instagram or Snapchat. As P19 described:

“If I’m not sure about someone, I’ll be like, okay, like, message me on Instagram. Because that’s happened numerous times where like they’re just catfishing completely.” [P19]

For some participants, the importance of being able to prove their authenticity was a motivator to post on Instagram, or to link to it from their dating app profiles ¹²³. For example, P2 shared:

“It is worth having an Instagram to prove that I am a real person, not a fake person trying to steal photos or identity or anything like that.” [P2]

Beyond proving that they were a real person, some participants also curated “highlights” of their stories on Instagram as a way for new people to get to know them, as we describe above ¹²⁴. Similarly, in the following sub-theme we describe how participants got to know those they met on dating apps, and assessed compatibility with them.

5.3.6.5.2 Assessing compatibility and getting to know people better

Beyond verifying someone’s identity, participants described a number of strategies they used to decide whether they wanted to continue interacting with people they met on dating apps. For many participants, this involved moving their interactions with people they were interested in to other platforms, if they had not done so already. As we describe in this sub-theme, seeing peoples’ profiles on non-dating apps could help participants get a sense of who they were talking to. However, some also shared other reasons to add people from dating apps on other platforms. For example, many described how they, or those who they were interacting with, did not have notifications turned on for dating apps and, therefore, were slow to reply.

Assessing compatibility was often done by evaluating peoples’ public profiles to see whether they were a good match. For example, P4 shared that he would “always go for a Facebook or Insta stalk... to suss them out”. Some participants shared things that they looked for when trying to assess their compatibility with new people. For example, P5 looks at people’s following and follower counts on Instagram, and their ratio, to figure out the “sort of person they are or what their social group is or their background”. Similarly, P11 checks to see if they have a reasonable number of

¹²³ We discuss how participants did this as part of curating their dating app profiles in 5.3.4.3.2.

¹²⁴ See *Distinction between posts and stories* (§ 5.3.4.1.2, p. 109).

followers, which might help indicate, along with other signals, if someone is real. He also looks to see if people have set their pronouns on Instagram:

“It doesn’t necessarily put me off [if they don’t], but if someone does have pronouns, it’s definitely a big tick. Because it means that they have a general awareness around more queer angled communication, or just sort of a general understanding of how queer people use social media, and so they’re more likely to be receptive to a trans or queer identity, which is what I possess.” [P11]

Similar to this, a number of participants shared how they tried to assess compatibility in people’s values or politics. This could be by looking at how they presented or what they posted, but also through direct interactions. For example, P8 described a more direct approach where he brings up a political issue to see how people react. He also commented that the political tags he could put on his dating app profiles are not localised which makes them confusing to use – “political affiliations are American so it doesn’t really make sense because liberal is left-wing [there], but it’s not here” ¹²⁵.

Seeing how someone presents online could also help start conversations. For example, P17 talked about how he struggles to interact with people who do not have well fleshed out profiles. As he put it, “I prefer to get to know someone before I interact with them, at least on a face value”. Being more exposed to what others shared could also spur friendships, although sometimes at the expense of any previous desire for more romantic interactions, as P14 describes:

“I suppose because moving on to that other platform that was seen as a progression... so I got to see more of their lives, so probably a bit more invested in the relationship. Because Instagram, you’re actually seeing some day-to-day sort of stuff. But because it’s still not actually meeting up for like, a little while, by the time the first date rolls around, at least for me, I’ve probably friendzoned them in my mind already and be like, you’re just someone who’s around, I’m like, I’ll go grab a coffee with you, because I’m curious about what your day-to-day life has been that I’ve seen through these apps as well.” [P14]

While the extra view into people’s lives provided by adding them on Instagram was often described as a good thing, some participants preferred to keep their public profiles closer to their chest. Some described that they share their Snapchat accounts with people from dating apps because they are often disconnected from their other, more personal, accounts. For example, P8 described that if he prefers to give someone his Snapchat compared to Instagram because the former does not have a profile of past posts someone might be able to use form a narrow view of who he is. Even if not solely to keep some mystery, some participants saw Snapchat’s lack of a profile compared to Instagram as an advantage. As P7 described, interacting on

¹²⁵ In Australia, the Liberal Party is on the right of the political spectrum.

Snapchat keeps conversations “more casual” because it does not have “profiles and years worth of photos and things like that”. Similarly, P5 likes the simplicity of Snapchat:

“Personally, the app that I feel easiest to communicate on is something like Snapchat, where it’s an instant thing and it’s purely for messaging. It’s not for other things. I find that [with] Instagram, or something like that, it’s a lot harder to get someone’s attention on.” [P5]

In addition, the visual nature of communicating through Snapchat could also help get to know someone better. For example, both P8 and P17 described that being able to see and share facial expressions alongside text, as is often the case when conversing through Snaps, helps communicate more meaning. Seeing real-time photos of the other person could also help participants see less curated sides of those who they were talking to. For example, as P5 described:

“Especially if it’s a romantic thing, it’s a lot easier to get a feeling for what someone looks like and what sort of person they are outside of those crafted profiles, which have selected images. Yeah, I feel like that really changes your perspective of them.” [P5]

As some participants described, sharing nudes or sexting could also be part of assessing compatibility and progressing conversations with people on dating apps. Often, this could happen on dating apps themselves, but sometimes could move to other platforms as well. Some described how there is a way to go about sharing nudes that, and that they can lose interest in someone if they deviate from it. For example, P5 described that similar to others, he does not like if someone starts a conversation by sending explicit pictures¹²⁶, but that once conversing with someone he or they might ask to share more pictures. Both he and P23 described an order to sending pictures, for example, sending more face pictures, then torso pictures, and finally nudes. At each point, the expectation was that this would be reciprocal, and P5 described that if someone asks to see his pictures but does not send any back that it is “an automatic block because it feels like a betrayal of trust”. As P23 described, he prefers to share his nudes using Grindr’s album feature, which allows one to share a precreated collection of pictures and videos. In addition to making it easier to share his “greatest hits” of explicit content, as he put it, he could easily see who had it had been shared with, and revoke their access to view it if he desired. A further benefit he described is that it obscures the images he has shared in the chat, so he does not have to see them if he scrolls back through his conversations.

For some participants, sharing nudes could also be a reason to move conversations to another platform. Often, Snapchat was the platform such interactions moved to, and many participants linked this to that platform’s reputation as a place as a place to do it. The platform’s ephemerality could also factor into this. For example, P5 described how he feels more comfortable sharing more explicit content of himself on

¹²⁶ See *Receiving unsolicited NSFW content and being pressured to sext* (§ 5.3.6.4.2, p. 160) where this is discussed.

Snapchat “because of its temporary nature”. However, P5 did also comment that Snapchat could bring a false sense security, mentioning that he has had people screenshot Snaps he has sent. Moving to another platform could also be of practical benefit. For example, P17 noted that while it is easy to send photos on Grindr, it is difficult to send videos, and this often causes conversations to be moved to Snapchat (or alternatively Whatsapp).

The more “casual” nature of Snapchat as described by P7, and the platform’s reputation for being a place to share NSFW images, could shape the interactions participants had. For example, as P19 described, people often want to add him on Snapchat but conversations often die out after a couple of days. In addition, as we described above ¹²⁷, adding someone on Snapchat could come with unwanted pressure to share explicit pictures. However, it was not necessarily a negative that conversations on Snapchat could often lead to sharing increasingly revealing pictures – as participants described, it depended on the situation, and whether they wanted to engage in this way, or instead felt pressured to. For example, P8 saw it as part of flirting with someone on the platform. As he described:

“I think it’s just like a natural consequence of an extended conversation with someone you’re actively flirting with or sending photos of yourself. Um, and then sometimes people ask for a photo without a shirt on or whatever, or sometimes you might just take a photo... with less clothes on.” [P8]

For some participants, it was important to maintain anonymity until they had built trust in the other person. For example, while P17 would share his alt Snapchat account with people to share nudes, he would only share his personal Snapchat or Instagram once he had a personal connection with someone. Similarly, P3 described how he only gives people his other social platform accounts if they have interacted enough, and the conversation is progressing. As we explore in the following sub-theme, getting on well with someone was often a reason to meet someone in the physical realm.

5.3.6.5.3 Moving from online to in-person Evaluating whether to meet someone in-person was a common motivation for participants to attempt to verify someone’s identity and to add them on other platforms, as described above. Moving to a different platform could also help with discretion. For example, P3 described how when meeting someone, he often tries to add people elsewhere so that he does not have to open a dating app in public to communicate with them. Some participants also talked about other ways they navigated meeting people from dating apps.

Participants described a range of safety strategies they used when meeting people in-person for the first time. For example, a number of participants described trying to meet people from dating apps in public places. Some also shared that they would

¹²⁷ See *Receiving unsolicited NSFW content and being pressured to sext* (§ 5.3.6.4.2, p. 160).

tell a friend when they were meeting someone from a dating app for the first time.

While some participants were comfortable just verifying the identity and of the person they were seeing, others were much more restricted in who they would meet. For example, P4 described being very wary of meeting people for “fear of the unknown”. He described that he would only feel comfortable doing so if he had built up a great level of trust with someone first or had mutual friends who could vouch for them. Similarly, P11 described that he would only meet someone if they already had mutual friends, and that he would likely do so in a public place and with someone else there.

On the other hand, some participants admitted that they did not take any active precautions when meeting people from dating apps. For some, this changed over time as they became more comfortable meeting people. As P3 described, he used to be more cautious but has become more comfortable as he has not had any bad experiences. Similarly, P9 when asked whether he does anything to figure out whether he can trust the people he meets responded:

“No, I’m fairly trusting. I am totally fine with anything, so I feel like I’m happy to like, go for a coffee and like I yeah, I don’t... yeah, I think I’m probably a bit dangerous, I think it can definitely go wrong. And um, there’s probably people out there who’re like, don’t do that... but yeah, I’ve definitely met up with people before... yeah, that I probably should not have or I probably should have got to know them a little bit more but I feel like yeah, I’ve been, yeah, fine so far.” [P9]

Both P1 and P9 described preferring to meet someone from dating apps relatively quickly. As P1 shared, if he’s on Grindr, it is usually because he’s looking for someone to hookup with immediately. As a result, he tries to keep conversations on Grindr because he does not want people from the app interacting with him on other platforms. However, if he decides he gets on well with someone after meeting them, he’ll then swap contact details. Along similar lines, P9 described preferring to get to know someone in person than online.

“I’m very open from the beginning. I feel like if anyone asks for any of my social platforms, my number, my home address, my bank details... I’m like, there you go... Even if they like, straight off the bat, like, do you want to have coffee? I’m like, yep, let’s go! I think I prefer that if anything... I don’t mind having long conversations, but I would much rather meet someone over coffee and have a conversation, than yeah, messaging.” [P9]

5.4 Chapter 5 Conclusion

This second study built on the findings from *Study 1* to explore, at a deeper level, how queer young men use social platforms. We did this by interviewing 24 queer

young men about their experiences on social platforms, aided by the use of a probe kit we designed to elicit reflections from them between interviews. Through reflexive thematic analysis, we generated findings from the interview transcripts and probe returns, which we presented in this chapter.

Our findings from this study show the wide-ranging impacts, both positive and negative, that social platforms had on our participants' lives. Social platforms helped participants learn about being queer or trans, often providing them exposure to LGBTQ+ content many thought they would have struggled to access otherwise¹²⁸. Similarly, many participants credited social platforms as helping them find peers and community that they otherwise would not have found¹²⁹. For many, their social platform presences provided a way for them to express themselves to trusted audiences¹³⁰, and for those participants who wanted to share their identities more broadly, social platforms also provided a way to assert being queer or trans.

However, many also described how using social platforms had opened them up to harm, whether from those external to the LGBTQ+ community, or not. For example, participants described experiences of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic harassment from those outside the community¹³¹. In addition, many described how social platforms reinforced “toxic” ideals within the community about what it means to be a queer man, and described how this had negatively impacted the way they saw themselves¹³². Although many participants negatively described such ideals and the pressure they felt to conform to them, we found that participants interacted with this culture in complex ways. For example, many participants described how “toxic” content could be engaging, or how they curated an attractive image of themselves through their social platform presences¹³³.

Our findings also showed that participants' use of dating apps was often intertwined with their other social platform experiences. For example, many described how they curated their dating app profiles, often linking from their profiles to accounts on other platforms, or making that jump as part of their direct interactions with people they met¹³⁴. Many also described how they saw dating apps as part of a spectrum, highlighting the variance in their expectations and experiences across each, as well as how they saw differences in their design contributing to them¹³⁵. Similarly, our findings revealed how participants presented, and curated audiences for, NSFW sides of themselves, and how this fit with their broader use of social platforms. For example, describing the ways participants posted thirst traps or NSFW content

¹²⁸ See *Learning about and accepting one's identity* (§ 5.3.1.1, p. 76).

¹²⁹ See *Meeting other queer and trans young men* (§ 5.3.6.1, p. 145).

¹³⁰ See both *Concealing being queer or trans to avoid negative experiences* (§ 5.3.2.1, p. 89) and *Being more authentic with trusted audiences* (§ 5.3.5.1, p. 131), where participants described this.

¹³¹ See *Navigating homophobia, biphobia and transphobia on social platforms* (§ 5.3.2.1.3, p. 92)

¹³² See *Wrestling with the pressure to conform to the image of an ideal queer man* (§ 5.3.3, p. 94).

¹³³ See *“Toxic” content can be engaging* (§ 5.3.3.2.1, p. 104) and *Curating an attractive image* (§ 5.3.4, p. 107), respectively.

¹³⁴ See *Curating dating app profiles* (§ 5.3.4.3, p. 124) and *Building rapport, trust and relationships with people from dating apps* (§ 5.3.6.5, p. 162), respectively.

¹³⁵ See *Using a spectrum of dating apps* (§ 5.3.6.2, p. 151) and *Matching processes can improve interactions but reduce engagement* (§ 5.3.6.3, p. 155), respectively.

publicly while navigating privacy concerns ¹³⁶. Unfortunately, many described negative experiences from mismatched expectations on dating apps, and highlighted issues around consent that extended to other social platforms as well ¹³⁷.

In the following chapter, we address RQ 1 by discussing our findings from this study, along with those from *Study 1*. Subsequently, in *Part III*, we describe how we used initial findings from this study to ground design explorations for social platform features to improve the experiences of queer young men.

¹³⁶ See *Posting thirst traps and other NSFW content* (§ 5.3.4.2, p. 113).

¹³⁷ See *Navigating mismatched expectations on dating apps and issues around consent* (§ 5.3.6.4, p. 158).

Chapter 6

RQ 1 Discussion: What role do social platforms play in shaping the experiences of queer young men?

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we respond to RQ 1 by discussing findings from *Study 1* and *Study 2* related to participants' experiences with current social platforms. Our findings from these studies contribute to understandings of how social platforms shape the experiences of queer young men, and to a limited extent through our findings from *Study 1*, to other groups within the LGBTQ+ community. Many of our findings are consistent with prior work in HCI, and we provide new evidence in these areas through accounts of our participants' experiences. This is particularly the case for findings related to learning about being queer, finding peers, managing disclosure, and having negative interactions on dating apps. However, we also extend prior work in several ways, for example, highlighting ways in which participants' curation practices extended beyond disclosure, describing how dominant ideas around what it means to be a queer man shaped participants' experiences, exploring how matching systems on dating apps impacted interactions, and detailing how social platforms were used in NSFW ways that are often overlooked. We discuss our findings across the following five sections:

- *Social platforms are vital for developing identity and finding community* (§ 6.2, p. 172).
- *Curating disclosure and beyond* (§ 6.3, p. 174).
- *How idealisation shapes experiences* (§ 6.4, p. 177).

- *Dating apps are a double-edged sword* (§ 6.5, p. 180).
- *Social platforms are used in NSFW ways* (§ 6.6, p. 184).

6.2 Social platforms are vital for developing identity and finding community

In this section, we discuss our findings related to the ways social platforms helped participants learn about their identities and connect to peers. As we describe, many of our participants' experiences aligned with prior work, adding evidence to the importance of social platforms for LGBTQ+ young people. We discuss this across two sections:

- *Learning about identity and accepting oneself through online content* (§ 6.2.1, p. 172).
- *Providing connections to peers* (§ 6.2.2, p. 173).

6.2.1 Learning about identity and accepting oneself through online content

Social platforms provided a way for many of our participants in both studies 1 and 2 to learn about being LGBTQ+ ¹. Often this was by providing exposure to content through which they could see how other LGBTQ+ people were presenting, or learn about queer and trans history or issues. Similar to the findings of others (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Gray, 2009; McConnell et al., 2017), this was particularly important for participants who did not have access to such information in the physical realm. For example, many participants described how their home or schooling environments were not supportive of LGBTQ+ identities, and as such, social platforms were a lifeline for them. A number of participants described how some of the content they found most valuable on social platforms was from peers or role models who helped them accept their experiences. As we found, such content was often particularly valuable in the early stages of identity discovery and acceptance, in line with Fox and Ralston (2016) and Gray (2009).

Although some participants described actively seeking out LGBTQ+ content, others had unintentionally stumbled across it, often in ways that were revelatory for them. This echoes findings from Delmonaco and Haimson (2023), who found social platforms could provide exposure to LGBTQ+ issues (in the case of their research, relating to sexual health) that queer and trans young people were not already aware of, and that this could cause them to start intentionally seeking out related information. For example, P22 in *Study 2* described how he did not think he would have worked out he was trans when he did if it were not for discovering trans

¹ See *Technologies for self-discovery* (§ 4.3.1, p. 55) and *Learning about and accepting one's identity* (§ 5.3.1.1, p. 76), respectively.

communities on Tumblr². In this way, platforms often helped sensitise our participants to LGBTQ+ identities, helping them realise they might themselves be queer and trans, similar to the findings of Fox and Ralston (2016).

In addition to helping many of our participants learn about being queer, content that they saw on social platforms could also help them become more accepting of their identities³. As a number of *Study 2* participants described, seeing others share experiences they could identify with was helpful for feeling more comfortable in themselves⁴. Participants in both studies also highlighted that the connections social platforms provided them to understanding LGBTQ+ and wider events helped them feel a greater belonging within the community⁵. For some *Study 2* participants, this was part of a moral duty they felt to seek out such content and learn more about the community.

Some participants described wanting to pay forward the learning they had received from content shared by peers on social platforms. As Fox and Ralston (2016) found in their work exploring how LGBTQ+ people learn about their identities online, this was more common for those part of less frequently represented groups within the LGBTQ+ community such as those who are trans. Similarly, among our participants in *Study 2*, P11, a trans man, wanted to create content about his own transition that would help others in the future.

6.2.2 Providing connections to peers

In addition to providing access to LGBTQ+ content, many participants in studies 1 and 2 described how social platforms connected them to peers. As many described, social platforms helped them find peers and communities they otherwise would not have found⁶. Peer support has been described as a protective factor against minority stress (Meyer, 2003; Perales & Todd, 2018; Pitoňák, 2017), and our participants' experiences showed how finding peers on social platforms supported them. For many of our participants in studies 1 and 2, having friends who were also LGBTQ+ was a way to avoid having to constantly explain their identities⁷. As Carrasco and Kerne (2018) highlight, interacting with peers online can experience the “partial privilege” of not having to explicitly signify their identities.

² See *Learning about being LGBTQ+* (§ 5.3.1.1.1, p. 76).

³ Although as we discuss in *How idealisation shapes experiences* (§ 6.4, p. 177), the content participants saw on social platforms could also have negative impacts.

⁴ See *Becoming more accepting of oneself based on online content* (§ 5.3.1.1.2, p. 81).

⁵ See *Technologies for self-discovery* (§ 4.3.1, p. 55) and *Connecting with LGBTQ+ history and current events* (§ 5.3.1.2, p. 82).

⁶ See *Technologies for self-discovery* (§ 4.3.1, p. 55) and *Finding communities they otherwise wouldn't have found* (§ 5.3.6.1.1, p. 145), respectively.

⁷ See *Seeking queer spaces* (§ 4.3.6, p. 60) and *Being more comfortable expressing queerness those who are not cisgender-heterosexual men* (§ 5.3.2.1.2, p. 91), respectively.

6.3 Curating disclosure and beyond

In this section, we describe findings relating to how our participants curated the audiences of their social platform presentations. As we found, while they used social platform affordances to conceal being LGBTQ+, in line with prior work (Carrasco & Kerne, 2018; DeVito et al., 2018b; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Orne, 2011), their curation practices also extended beyond this. For example, even if they had widely disclosed being queer or trans, many of our *Study 2* participants curated who they shared their more authentic or NSFW sides with. We discuss our findings across four sections:

- *Curating to achieve strategic outness and avoid negative experiences* (§ 6.3.1, p. 174).
- *Using social platforms to assert identity* (§ 6.3.2, p. 175).
- *Curating beyond disclosure of identity* (§ 6.3.3, p. 176).
- *Encountering barriers to curation* (§ 6.3.4, p. 176).

6.3.1 Curating to achieve strategic outness and avoid negative experiences

The ability social platforms provided for participants to curate the audiences of their presentations for strategic outness was essential to allowing them to experience the benefits of the platforms, in line with prior work (Carrasco & Kerne, 2018; DeVito et al., 2018b; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Orne, 2011). For example, a significant number of participants across *Study 1* and *Study 2* described the ways they used audience curation affordances on social platforms to conceal being queer or trans from audiences they thought would be unsupportive⁸. As participants described, this was often to conceal being LGBTQ+ from those they knew in the physical realm, but it could also be to protect themselves from strangers making negative comments. In doing so, they were able to experience the benefits of using social platforms, such as exploring and enacting their identities, while protecting themselves from potentially negative experiences.

The focus of participants' concealment was often family, consistent with prior work (Chandra & Hanckel, 2022). As some have argued, peoples' racial, cultural and religious backgrounds can often influence the ways that they navigate disclosure (Nadal et al., 2015; Sadika et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2022). For example, some may choose not to disclose their identities to protect their families (Sadika et al., 2020). Among our participants, many of those who most closely guarded their identities from family cited their cultural or religious background as a reason for concealment. For example, P18 in *Study 2* described that he initially decided to conceal his queerness because he did not think his family would be able to cope with knowing. Across both studies and in line with prior work (DeVito et al., 2018b; Talbot et al., 2022), Facebook was often a platform participants concealed their

⁸ See *Life in the online closet* (§ 4.3.2, p. 56) and *Concealing being queer or trans to avoid negative experiences* (§ 5.3.2.1, p. 89), respectively.

identities on, highlighting pressures to have family as part of their audience there.

6.3.2 Using social platforms to assert identity

In contrast to practices of concealment, some of our participants used social platforms to assert their queerness, as we discuss in this section.

Prior work on identity disclosure for LGBTQ+ young people on social platforms has often found that most prefer to disclose their identities implicitly (Marwick & boyd, 2014; Owens, 2017; Pinch et al., 2024). Similarly, some of our participants described how they implicitly disclosed their identities, for example, posting photos LGBTQ+ events but not explicitly saying they were queer⁹. However, a number of participants described how they had made use of the audiences they had on social platforms to broadcast their identities through coming out posts¹⁰. Disclosure of LGBTQ+ identity is often an on-going process where people are strategic about who they tell, and when (Duguay, 2016; Orne, 2011; Talbot et al., 2022). Reflecting this, our participants often made such posts after they had told closer friends or family, and multiple described how a desire to not have to actively manage disclosure motivated this. As we discuss above, Facebook is often a platform LGBTQ+ young people avoid expressing their queerness due to pressures to have family as part of the audience DeVito et al. (2018b) and Talbot et al. (2022). However, we found that this could be a benefit when choosing to explicitly disclose one's identity, as evidenced by all of the coming out posts that our participants described making being on Facebook.

Beyond explicit posts, or implicit hints that participants were queer or trans, some described other ways that they used social platforms to assert their identities. Our findings suggest that LGBTQ+ people might assert their identity explicitly in other ways that warrant further exploration. One such example is the way P9 in *Study 1* explicitly changed his name to broadcast being trans at a point where he explained he was too anxious to tell people any other way¹¹. Similarly, some *Study 2* participants described how they have pride flags in their profiles bios so that it would be clear that they were LGBTQ+, and they could avoid having to explain their identities. This suggests that understanding how to support such assertions of LGBTQ+ identity could be an area for future work. A challenge to address here will be designing platforms that are better suited for such life transitions. As prior work has found, social platform profiles are often designed in ways that assume people have static identities, and this can be problematic during life transitions (Haimson et al., 2015).

⁹ See *Making profiles explicitly or implicitly queer or trans* (§ 5.3.2.2.2, p. 94).

¹⁰ See *Coming out through technology* (§ 4.3.3, p. 56) and *Coming out using social platforms* (§ 5.3.2.2.1, p. 93).

¹¹ See *Coming out through technology* (§ 4.3.3, p. 56).

6.3.3 Curating beyond disclosure of identity

It is understandable given the continued stigma of LGBTQ+ identities that most work around self-presentation by LGBTQ+ people on social platforms has been in relation to identity concealment or sensitive disclosures (e.g., Carrasco and Kerne, 2018; DeVito et al., 2018b; Pinch et al., 2021). However, our findings suggest the focus on disclosure of being LGBTQ+ misses the other ways that queer and trans people manage their self-presentation. For example, the ways our participants described using alt-accounts or audience curation features to share more authentic or queerer presentations ¹².

Even if it was widely known that they were LGBTQ+, expressions of their identity would often be shared to curated audiences. For example, a number of *Study 2* participants described how they presented more masculine or heteronormative front-stage presentations to cisgender heterosexual men, even if they had disclosed they were LGBTQ+ to them ¹³. Although using many of the same strategies and affordances described in prior work around LGBTQ+ young people, for example, separating audiences across platforms or using privacy affordances, our participants described using them for topics not often discussed in such work (DeVito et al., 2018b; Hanckel et al., 2019; Talbot et al., 2022). For example, using the Close Friends story on Instagram to share stories of misadventures, or as we discuss elsewhere, for NSFW content ¹⁴. Although heteronormative work has described similar uses of backstage spaces, for example, how people use alt-accounts to share less polished presentations to curated audiences (e.g., Huang and Vitak, 2022; Xiao et al., 2020), the focus on disclosure means there are few accounts of such practices with LGBTQ+ participants.

6.3.4 Encountering barriers to curation

Although participants in *Study 1* and *Study 2* were able to use various strategies and affordances on social platforms to curate the audiences of their presentations, they described barriers to doing so effectively. This is consistent with prior work which has often found that social platform affordances for curating audiences are not adequate (Carrasco & Kerne, 2018; Marwick & boyd, 2014). For example, Carrasco and Kerne (2018) argue that platforms do not offer enough control over “selective visibility”, a finding that we echo.

As Marwick and boyd (2014) highlight, the ways privacy is designed for on social platforms does not neatly map to the complex ways that people conceive of privacy in the real world. Similarly, we found that our participants curation needs often did not neatly fit binary curation affordances offered by platforms such as Instagram. For example, as we highlighted above, disclosure of identities for our participants

¹² See *Curating beyond disclosure of identity* (§ 6.3.3, p. 176).

¹³ See *Being more comfortable expressing queerness those who are not cisgender-heterosexual men* (§ 5.3.2.1.2, p. 91).

¹⁴ See *Posting less curated presentations* (§ 5.3.5.1.2, p. 132) and *Using main accounts to post thirst traps and NSFW content* (§ 5.3.4.2.2, p. 116), respectively.

was often not binary. As we discuss in a subsequent section ¹⁵, NSFW uses of social platforms can make the curation strategies people employ more complex, and this is often overlooked. For example, many participants described having connections that did not fit neatly within heteronormative boundaries between friendship and romantic or sexual relationships, and this complicated the ways they targeted the audiences of their posts. In some cases, participants described having graduated levels of their NSFW presentations, for example, P16 and P17 in *Study 2* described having multiple private stories on Snapchat for NSFW content, which varied how explicit they were ¹⁶.

While this is supported by Snapchat, Instagram only has a binary option for whether one shares to the main story, or the Close Friends story. Furthermore, Close Friends is only for stories, and there is no way to curate the audience of feed posts beyond restricting the visibility of the entire account to only approved followers. Similar to prior work, participants overcame these limitations by creating alt accounts (Birnholtz, 2018; Huang & Vitak, 2022). However, this could be burdensome, for instance, by requiring maintenance of another account, or create further complications. For example, one affordance shared by both private and Close Friends stories, is that their existence is only visible to those who are in the curated audience list. Alt accounts, on the other hand, are visible even if their profile content is not, and as participants mentioned, this means they can be discovered by those who they may not have wanted to find them, an issue described by others as well (Carrasco & Kerne, 2018).

6.4 How idealisation shapes experiences

In this section we describe the pressures that participants felt to conform to dominant ideas about what it means to be a queer man and to post idealised content, as well as how they subverted and overcame them. We do this across four sections:

- *Images of queer men are not diverse* (§ 6.4.1, p. 177).
- *Relationships to idealised content are complex* (§ 6.4.2, p. 178)
- *Finding spaces to cheat the need to post idealised content* (§ 6.4.3, p. 178).
- *Gaining perspective and avoiding triggering content could help participants overcome self-comparison* (§ 6.4.4, p. 179).

6.4.1 Images of queer men are not diverse

Many participants in *Study 2* described a “toxic” culture on social platforms that made them feel as though they had to conform to a narrow and idealised version of what it means to be a queer man ¹⁷. This pervaded many aspects of their social

¹⁵ See *Social platforms are used in NSFW ways* (§ 6.6, p. 184).

¹⁶ See *Using main accounts to post thirst traps and NSFW content* (§ 5.3.4.2.2, p. 116).

¹⁷ See *The need to conform to the image of an ideal queer man* (§ 5.3.3.1, p. 95) where we discuss our findings related to this.

platform use, for example, content that they saw on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok often led to negative self-comparison, and many described discrimination or harassment for not conforming on dating apps. As a number of participants described, the idealised version of a queer man was masculine, muscular, cisgender and white¹⁸. This is consistent with research from outside HCI which has found that many queer men aim to perform hegemonic masculinity (Miller, 2018). Similarly, it aligns with accounts of lateral violence that describe how those with multiply marginalised identities are discriminated against in the LGBTQ+ community (Sadika et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2022).

Participants in *Study 2* described two main avenues through which they were exposed to this culture, the content they saw on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, and on dating apps¹⁹. For example, describing how much of the content they saw was of muscular shirtless men. Many described folk theories (DeVito et al., 2018a; Karizat et al., 2021) of why such content was presented to them, seeing the design of social platform algorithms as incentivising the creation and presentation of such idealised content²⁰. For example, describing how the Explore page on Instagram was often filled with shirtless men and that interacting with idealised content could lead to more of it being suggested.

6.4.2 Relationships to idealised content are complex

Although seeing idealised content on social platforms could lead to negative self-comparison, some participants in *Study 2* described a complex relationship with seeing it. For example, despite describing the negative impact it had on them, some shared how they found such content engaging and how they enjoyed seeing it²¹. Similarly, although almost all participants in *Study 2* described the negative impacts idealised content had on them, many described the ways they conformed to it by trying to curate an attractive image of themselves²². For example, consistent with heteronormative work (Huang & Vitak, 2022; Xiao et al., 2020), many talked of the expectations they felt to post only the best things on their main Instagram accounts, and some detailed the efforts that they went to in order to create the perfect post.

6.4.3 Finding spaces to cheat the need to post idealised content

As some participants described, differences in posting formats or venues could shape pressures they felt to conform. For example, many described the difference they felt in expectations on Instagram between posts and stories, often highlighting that the

¹⁸ See *Images of what it is to be a queer man are not diverse* (§ 5.3.3.1.1, p. 95).

¹⁹ We discuss this in the context of dating apps in *Those who did not fit dominant ideals faced discrimination and harassment* (§ 6.5.4, p. 183)

²⁰ See *Algorithmic presentation of idealised content* (§ 5.3.3.2.2, p. 106).

²¹ See *“Toxic” content can be engaging* (§ 5.3.3.2.1, p. 104).

²² See *Performing an idealised self* (§ 5.3.4.1, p. 108).

ephemeral nature of stories meant they could be used for things that were less highly curated²³. Many also described using alt accounts, similar to heteronormative work around “finstas” (Huang & Vitak, 2022; Xiao et al., 2020), although none of our participants used that term, perhaps highlighting differences in queer and heteronormative cultures. Many described how spaces with trusted audiences allowed them to post more less filtered presentations of themselves²⁴. BeReal was mentioned by a number of participants as a platform that encouraged less curated presentations, although some described how they still tried to show only their best sides²⁵. Many participants described how they appreciated the license BeReal gave them to post more mundane content of themselves, commenting that the platform felt much more laid-back than Instagram²⁶. Beyond the direction in the name of the platform and its culture, participants ascribed this to having only a small number of close friends on the platform. This matches our participants experiences around other spaces where they shared less curated presentations and prior work (Huang & Vitak, 2022; Xiao et al., 2020).

Carrasco and Kerne (2018) invoke the way Light (2011) describes “cheating” as a design strategy, and advocate for allowing people the flexibility to subvert restrictions around presenting one “authentic” self on social platforms. While Carrasco and Kerne’s (2018) framing was around supporting selective visibility of LGBTQ+ identity disclosure, our participants’ experiences showed how audience curation features could also allow them to cheat expectations around idealised content. However, some participants’ experiences on BeReal demonstrate that exposing cheating, rather than obscuring it, could be beneficial under the right circumstances. For example, P21 described how he had been told off by his friends for retaking his daily photo post too many times because the platform exposed the number of times that he did this²⁷. By showing how many times he “cheated” the task of capturing a “real” moment, BeReal’s design enabled a form of social accountability in favour of less curated presentations. Although the novelty may have worn off for many of BeReal’s users (Callie Holtermann, 2023), some of our participants included, their experiences highlight that there are ways to design platforms that encourage people to share more authentic versions of themselves.

6.4.4 Gaining perspective and avoiding triggering content could help participants overcome self-comparison

Although prior work has highlighted issues with body image as a result of idealised content on social platforms (Breslow et al., 2020; Waling et al., 2023), such work has not often considered how design could play a role in improving such issues. Some *Study 2* participants described how they had reduced negative self-comparison to

²³ See *Distinction between posts and stories* (§ 5.3.4.1.2, p. 109).

²⁴ See *Being more authentic with trusted audiences* (§ 5.3.5.1, p. 131).

²⁵ See *Posting less curated presentations* (§ 5.3.5.1.2, p. 132).

²⁶ See *Curating spaces to interact with trusted audiences* (§ 5.3.5.1.1, p. 131).

²⁷ See *Only posting positive or the best things* (§ 5.3.4.1.1, p. 108).

those they saw on social platforms²⁸. For example, many described how avoiding content that could be triggering, or maintaining perspective when seeing it had helped them. Similar to findings from Simpson and Semaan (2021), many participants also tried to influence the algorithms that presented content to them, for example, not interacting with it or flagging that they were “not interested”²⁹. Such strategies suggest that social platform designs which support people to do this could help mitigate the impacts of idealised content.

6.5 Dating apps are a double-edged sword

For our participants across studies 1 and 2, dating apps were a double-edged sword, both able to connect them to peers and open them up to harm. In this section, we discuss our findings related to them. We add to evidence around issues of lateral violence and consent, and how participants took care to protect themselves from harm. We also extend prior work by arguing that dating apps ought to be included in work exploring other social platforms, and that matching systems while having the potential to improve safety can reduce spontaneity. We discuss our findings across five sections:

- *Dating apps can be social spaces and linked to other platforms* (§ 6.5.1, p. 180).
- *Differing dating app cultures and designs shaped experiences* (§ 6.5.2, p. 181).
- *Mismatched expectations and issues of consent were common* (§ 6.5.3, p. 182).
- *Those who did not fit dominant ideals faced discrimination and harassment* (§ 6.5.4, p. 183).
- *Safety strategies were common* (§ 6.5.5, p. 183).

6.5.1 Dating apps can be social spaces and linked to other platforms

Many of our participants turned to dating apps as a way to find peers and connections to community, consistent with prior work (Brubaker et al., 2016; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Wongsomboon et al., 2023). Such work has often found that experiences on dating apps for those seeking friendship or other non-sexual connections could prove problematic. Similarly, many of our participants described negative experiences on dating apps when looking for other things³⁰, and some expressed desire for platforms more focused on finding social connections³¹. However, despite this, many of our participants from *Study 2* had success making friends and finding connections to community, even if they saw dating apps as less than ideal places to do so.

²⁸ See *Overcoming self-comparison* (§ 5.3.5.3, p. 141).

²⁹ See *Avoiding content that could be triggering* (§ 5.3.5.3.2, p. 142).

³⁰ See *Meeting people using dating apps* (§ 4.3.5, p. 58) and *Navigating mismatched expectations on dating apps and issues around consent* (§ 5.3.6.4, p. 158).

³¹ See *Seeking queer spaces* (§ 4.3.6, p. 60) and *Using dating apps as a way to find peers* (§ 5.3.6.1.4, p. 149).

Similar to Byron et al. (2021), we found that the distinction between dating apps and other social platforms became quite blurred; dating apps were often a way for our participants to seek and make friends, but also intertwined with the other platforms they used. For example, many participants linked to other platforms from their profiles, and adding people on other platforms was a common way that connections progressed³² For some participants, dating apps such as Grindr even provided a way to check which existing friends were nearby³³.

While dating apps are sometimes included in research around identity formation (e.g., Fox and Ralston, 2016), this is not always the case and they are often treated separately (e.g., McConnell et al., 2017). Similarly, much of the work about dating apps focuses on specific platforms, in particular studying Grindr use by queer men (e.g., Blackwell et al., 2015; Brubaker et al., 2016; Van De Wiele and Tong, 2014). Although Grindr may be the most used dating app for queer men in the Western contexts where much of this work has been situated, our findings show the importance of asking participants about all of the dating apps they used. Similar to how other social platforms are perceived in the context of the broader ecosystem in which they are used (DeVito et al., 2018b; Zhao et al., 2016), our participants in *Study 2* thought of the dating apps they used as part of a spectrum, each serving different, if overlapping, needs. In sharing their experiences with dating apps, they often defined their expectations in relation to other apps. Together, these findings make it difficult to argue that dating apps are not connected to LGBTQ+ people's wider online presences, or to justify their exclusion from studies including other social platforms.

This highlights the need to not just include dating apps in work that explores how queer and trans young people explore identity and find community, but to do so in a way that acknowledges the full extent of platforms that participants may be using. Given that current experiences on dating apps can be can leave a lot to be desired³⁴, there is also a need for more work that explores how social platform design can be improved to better support the community.

6.5.2 Differing dating app cultures and designs shaped experiences

An advantage of asking participants about their use of dating apps broadly and not constraining our research to a single platform was that we were able to identify the ways they perceived different apps in relation to each other. Many described how they saw dating apps as part of a spectrum between those supporting more casual and hookup based interactions (e.g., Grindr), and those more focused on longer

³² See *Linking to other social platforms from dating apps* (§ 5.3.4.3.2, p. 128) and *Building rapport, trust and relationships with people from dating apps* (§ 5.3.6.5, p. 162), respectively.

³³ See *Using dating apps as a way to find peers* (§ 5.3.6.1.4, p. 149).

³⁴ For example, as we describe in *Navigating mismatched expectations on dating apps and issues around consent* (§ 5.3.6.4, p. 158), many found dating apps uncomfortably sexualised.

term connections (e.g., Hinge)³⁵. Some participants also related their experiences on each app as to do with the way people are able to communicate with each other, for example, describing Tinder as facilitating nicer interactions due to the requirement to match before messaging, or because pictures cannot be sent, meaning they cannot receive unsolicited NSFW pictures³⁶. However, many described that their matches often did not lead to prolonged interactions, and some thought that Grindr’s people-nearby model where anyone can message anyone and profiles are displayed based on proximity (Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014), could lead to more dynamic interactions³⁷.

Some prior work has described differences in cultures between different dating apps, for example, Dietzel (2024) describes how Tinder and Grindr have different consent practices and sexual cultures, and others have described how matching shapes matching solely within the context of Tinder (e.g., Krüger and Charlotte Spilde, 2020). However, less attention has been paid to comparing how matching and non-matching based interfaces shape interactions. Our participants descriptions of the differences in their experiences between Tinder and Grindr imply that, although matching can in some ways be protective by filtering who is able to message, centring interactions around a matching event reduces spontaneity. Consider, for example, the different opportunities to strike up a conversation with someone between Tinder and Grindr. On Tinder, you match with someone and then either start the conversation or wait for them to message first – the match is the possibility to converse, but it is also the event around which it is based. On Grindr, you see someone on the grid because they are nearby and online, and you can message them. The same is true if the conversation dies out and you see the same person online again – it is another opportunity where it is socially acceptable to reach out, provided of course that the first interaction went okay. Unfortunately, as participants described, the trade off with anyone being able to message is that it can lead to more unwanted messages³⁸. However, this contrast does highlight an area for future design work, designing dating apps in ways that allow for spontaneous connections, while avoiding or reducing the potential for unwanted messages.

6.5.3 Mismatched expectations and issues of consent were common

Although participants did describe positive experiences on dating apps, there were many accounts of negative experiences. Participants often lamented the culture of Grindr in particular, describing how people could be rude or blunt, and how sexualised the messages they received on the platform could be³⁹. As prior work

³⁵ See *Using a spectrum of dating apps* (§ 5.3.6.2, p. 151) where we discuss the spectrum participants described, and how they perceived each dating app.

³⁶ See *Matching as a way to avoid negative interactions* (§ 5.3.6.3.1, p. 156).

³⁷ See *Matches often do not go anywhere* (§ 5.3.6.3.2, p. 157) and *Not having a matching process can allow for more dynamic interactions* (§ 5.3.6.3.3, p. 158), respectively.

³⁸ See *Mismatched expectations and issues of consent were common* (§ 6.5.3, p. 182) above.

³⁹ See *Meeting people using dating apps* (§ 4.3.5, p. 58) and *Navigating mismatched expectations on dating apps and issues around consent* (§ 5.3.6.4, p. 158).

around consent on dating apps has found, many people assume that consent for sexual interactions, both online and in the physical realm, is given by someone's presence on a dating app, leading to sexual violence and non-consensual interactions (Dietzel, 2024; Zytka et al., 2021). Although none of our participants described thinking in this way, their experiences of others sending them unsolicited NSFW content or sexually aggressive messages add evidence to the wide-spread nature of this problem.

6.5.4 Those who did not fit dominant ideals faced discrimination and harassment

As we discuss above ⁴⁰, dominant ideas around what it means to be a queer man shaped many participants' experiences on social platforms. This also extended onto dating apps where many participants described pressures to conform. For example, describing how they felt pressure to conform as a result of the many muscled torso photos used on platforms like Grindr. Evidencing this, a number created Honest Social Platform ads for Grindr, for example, highlighting that people need muscular torso to fit in, or describing the impact self-comparison to others on the app could have on them ⁴¹. As some participants described, not conforming also lead to being the target of harassment or discrimination.

Unfortunately, our findings were in line with many previous accounts of such experiences (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Brubaker et al., 2016; Wongsomboon et al., 2023). For many of the participants who were not white or cisgender, this difference shaped their experiences as well, for example describing racism, transphobia and biphobia ⁴², consistent with prior work (Sadika et al., 2020; Stacey & Forbes, 2022; Tran et al., 2022). In addition to being harassed, those with multiply marginalised identities could also be unwillingly fetishised. As Stacey and Forbes (2022) describe, this often happens along racial lines, however, among our participants this was mainly described those who were trans. Meyer (2003) and Pitoňák (2017) cite the psychological burden of always expecting rejection based on one's queerness as a cause for mental health disparities. Participants' experiences on Grindr reveal a strikingly similar picture of rejection and its negative impacts, but instead, from within their own community.

6.5.5 Safety strategies were common

To combat such mismatched expectations, our participants in *Study 2* employed a range of safety strategies to avoid negative experiences when interacting with new people on dating apps, in line with prior work (Albury & Byron, 2016; Byron & Albury, 2018) ⁴³. For example, participants took steps to avoid profiles that they

⁴⁰ See *How idealisation shapes experiences* (§ 6.4, p. 177).

⁴¹ See *Dating app experiences reinforce negative ideals* (§ 5.3.3.1.4, p. 99).

⁴² See also *Trans experiences of lateral violence* (§ 5.3.3.1.5, p. 103).

⁴³ See *Building rapport, trust and relationships with people from dating apps* (§ 5.3.6.5, p. 162) where we discuss how they did this.

thought might be bots or otherwise fake⁴⁴. Often the safety strategies employed participants, highlighting connections between their use of dating apps and other platforms.

Byron and Albury (2018) argue that many people make their own “rules” for using dating apps, and we saw this reflected in the various strategies described by participants. While there were commonalities, for example, many described verifying peoples’ identities by directing conversations to other social platforms, there was wide variation in participants’ practices⁴⁵. For example, participants who were more concerned with anonymity described how they did not like to give out other social platform accounts until after they had met someone, and then only if they had gotten on well. Others described how they were much more relaxed and did not take active strategies to protect their safety when meeting people⁴⁶.

Although not described by our participants in *Study 2*, as part of *Study 1*, P1 described how they set their gender and preferences on Tinder so that their profile would not be presented to heterosexual people on the app. Such behaviour has also been described by Pym et al. (2020), suggesting that desires to avoid cisgender heterosexual people on dating apps may be common among gender-diverse queer people.

6.6 Social platforms are used in NSFW ways

Our participants described numerous examples of using social platforms in not safe for work (NSFW) ways. As we argued in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, HCI has often shied away from discussing sexuality, and this extends to work around LGBTQ+ communities. However, as this work found, queer and trans young men use social platforms in NSFW ways that have not previously been discussed in HCI venues. For example, while NSFW online communities and uses of social platforms have been described previously in other fields (e.g., Cao, 2022; Dunn, 2023; Wignall, 2017; Zulier, 2021), there are very few descriptions within HCI of people posting NSFW content publicly or to restricted audiences such as Instagram’s Close Friends list⁴⁷. We discuss our findings across two sections:

- *The need to consider consent around posting of NSFW content* (§ 6.6.1, p. 185).
- *Using social platforms as part of sexuality* (§ 6.6.2, p. 186).

⁴⁴ See *Avoiding “toxic” people, catfishes and bots* (§ 5.3.6.5.1, p. 162).

⁴⁵ See *Avoiding “toxic” people, catfishes and bots* (§ 5.3.6.5.1, p. 162).

⁴⁶ See *Moving from online to in-person* (§ 5.3.6.5.3, p. 167).

⁴⁷ See *Posting thirst traps and other NSFW content* (§ 5.3.4.2, p. 113) where we describe such behaviour.

6.6.1 The need to consider consent around posting of NSFW content

There are important safety and consent implications that come alongside acknowledging that social platforms are used to post NSFW content publicly or to restricted stories. As *Study 2* participants expressed, consent was an important consideration when sharing NSFW content, and there was a desire for better ways to seek it. None of the social platforms used by participants currently allow people to opt-out of specific types of content shared by participants or being part of curated audiences. For example, as multiple participants described, the person who sets up a Close Friends story on Instagram or a private story on Snapchat gets to decide who to include, and there are no affordances for the viewer to change this. In the absence of affordances designed to support consent, multiple participants in *Study 2* described ways they tried to let people opt-in to seeing NSFW content they posted on social platforms⁴⁸. For example, by creating alt accounts that their audiences could opt-in to following as well, or sharing a poll asking people if they were happy to be on a Close Friends list where NSFW content was shared.

Although some participants found ways to seek consent when sharing NSFW content, issues around unsolicited NSFW content were commonly discussed by participants and highlights that the current designs of the social platforms they are using are not adequate to prevent them, echoing prior work (e.g., (Dietzel, 2024; Im et al., 2021; Zytka et al., 2021)). Although previous work has highlighted issues of consent in the context of unsolicited explicit pictures that are sent directly to someone (e.g., Dietzel, 2024; Van Ouytsel and Dhoest, 2022), such issues have received less attention where content is posted publicly, or to a restricted audience on someone’s profile, as our participants described doing⁴⁹.

In addition, discussions of designing audience curation affordances, which can be used to post NSFW content to a restricted audience, often do not consider consent. For example, discussions of designing such affordances are usually from the perspective of the self-presentation goals of the poster, whether to protect their privacy or share a targeted presentation (e.g., Carrasco and Kerne, 2018; Light, 2011) – left out are the perspectives of those who see these curated presentations. While this may be benign in cases where it pertains to non-explicit content, although not necessarily, knowing that people are using such features to share NSFW content raises issues of consent that are scarcely discussed in HCI. A notable exception is Im et al. (2021) who apply the framework of Affirmative Consent to social platforms, and argue that people do not have enough agency to tell systems what they want to see in their feeds. They provide the example that even if someone consents to following someone’s posts on social platforms, this does not imply consent to seeing triggering content. Similarly, although work around alt-accounts

⁴⁸ See *Navigating consent when sharing NSFW content* (§ 5.3.4.2.5, p. 123) where we describe how participants consent around such behaviour.

⁴⁹ See *Using main accounts to post thirst traps and NSFW content* (§ 5.3.4.2.2, p. 116) where we discuss how participants did this.

has previously mentioned their use for NSFW content (e.g., Xiao et al., 2020), considerations of consent and how participants navigate this are scarcely discussed.

While banning NSFW content is a strategy employed by a number of social platforms, prior work has shown that this can disproportionately impact LGBTQ+ communities. For example, the removal of NSFW content on Tumblr, once an important site for LGBTQ+ communities, caused what many called the “death” of the platform (Byron et al., 2019; Duguay, 2018). Similarly, classifications of what counts as nudity are problematic for trans and non-binary people (Duguay, 2018). Instead of ignoring sexuality or seeing social platforms as places that ought to be sanitised, HCI should acknowledge the ways people use them in NSFW ways and focus instead on addressing issues of consent. As Kannabiran et al. (2011) argue, the marginalisation of sexuality within the discipline is hard to defend when it is such an important part of human life.

Given the issues surrounding NSFW content and consent that participants raised, it is vital that those designing and researching social platforms are aware of safety and consent implications beyond direct interactions. As we discuss in section 10.6.5, future work ought to explore designs that better support consent.

6.6.2 Using social platforms as part of sexuality

Beyond considering safety implications, it is important to remember that people use social platforms in NSFW ways because they want to. As Taylor et al. (2024) argue, much of the work concerning LGBTQ+ people focuses on harms without considering the more positive or joyful aspects of their experiences. While there are certainly harms related to NSFW content on social platforms that need to be better understood and mitigated, many participants described enjoying sharing or receiving such content. For example, in *Study 2*, a number of participants shared their experiences posting NSFW content on Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. Although public posting of NSFW content has been reported in other fields (e.g., Cao, 2022; Dunn, 2023; Paasonen et al., 2023; Wignall, 2017), there are scarce mentions of such practices within HCI.

Our participants’ use of alt accounts as places to share NSFW content contrasts with heteronormative work that talks about how they are used and highlights the need for LGBTQ+ inclusive or specific research into their use. For example, while Huang and Vitak (2022) describe how their participants saw their “finsta” accounts as places they could share more authentic presentations with trusted audiences, some of our participants described using public alt accounts to post NSFW or suggestive content to seek attention and new followers. While Birnholtz (2018) explored the ways queer young men posted shirtless selfies for attention in similar ways to our participants, they focused solely on Instagram and the use of alt accounts was not discussed. Moreover, Instagram’s Close Friends feature, an important curation affordance for our participants, was only released after publication (Newton, 2018).

As described in *Using social platforms in NSFW ways* (§ 2.7, p. 26), prior work outside of HCI has found that NSFW online communities can be sites of friendship and social support. Our findings from *Study 2* echo this. For example, a number of participants in *Study 2* described how they formed connections with those they met in NSFW communities such as alt Twitter⁵⁰. However, work within HCI that explores how LGBTQ+ young people find peers, even if being inclusive of dating app experiences, often overlooks such NSFW communities.

6.7 Chapter 6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we responded to the first research question by discussing the role social platforms play in shaping the experiences of queer young men. In doing so, we drew on our findings from studies 1 and 2, and discussed them in relation to prior work. We now provide a brief summary of how we answered RQ 1.

We found that social platforms were often a double-edged sword for participants, both able to be of great benefit but at times having negative impacts. For example, participants in *Study 2* often talked about the negatives of platforms and how they wanted to spend less time on them, however, they also described the ways that platforms had connected them to peers and helped them explore their identities. Far from being wholly positive or negative, this tension ran through all areas of participants' experiences on social platforms.

Social platforms helped all of our participants across both studies learn about being LGBTQ+ and connect to peers⁵¹. This was consistent with prior work and adds to evidence surrounding the vital nature of social platforms for queer and trans young people. Similarly, our findings once again demonstrate the importance of being able to conceal being queer or trans from unsupportive audiences⁵². However, while much of the work about disclosure focuses on concealment, we found that many of our participants also used social platforms to disclose, or otherwise assert, their identities in ways that have received less attention⁵³. In addition, we found that the narrow focus on identity concealment or sensitive disclosures of much of the self-presentation work with LGBTQ+ young people has meant that many of the ways we found our participants had curated their presentations have received less attention⁵⁴. Similar to prior work, we found that our participants often faced barriers to curation, however, given that we also describe curation beyond concealment and of NSFW content, we also describe these issues in novel contexts⁵⁵.

Unfortunately, many participants described how the dominant culture on social platforms presented a narrow view of what it means to be a queer young man, and

⁵⁰ See *Finding community and peer support in more loosely defined sub-communities* (§ 5.3.6.1.3, p. 147).

⁵¹ See *Social platforms are vital for developing identity and finding community* (§ 6.2, p. 172).

⁵² See *Curating to achieve strategic outness and avoid negative experiences* (§ 6.3.1, p. 174).

⁵³ See *Using social platforms to assert identity* (§ 6.3.2, p. 175).

⁵⁴ See *Curating beyond disclosure of identity* (§ 6.3.3, p. 176).

⁵⁵ See *Encountering barriers to curation* (§ 6.3.4, p. 176).

that this negatively impacted their experiences on social platforms⁵⁶. As they described, images of queer men they saw online were not diverse and privileged those who conformed to hegemonic masculinity, often resulting in discrimination or negative self-comparison⁵⁷. However, despite the negative impacts that participants described, many had a complex relationship with idealised content, for example, finding it engaging or describing how they participated in cultures that reinforced it⁵⁸. However, we also found that participants utilised spaces with trusted audiences to cheat the need to present idealised content, sometimes in ways that have been described in heteronormative literature but not with LGBTQ+ populations⁵⁹. Similarly, we found that participants often described how gaining perspective or avoiding triggering content had help them overcome self-comparison, highlighting that supporting such strategies could be an area for future design efforts⁶⁰.

As we described above, social platforms were in many ways a double-edged sword for our participants, and this applied to their experiences on dating apps as well⁶¹. We found that dating apps could be sites of connection to peers, and argued that they should be included in social platform research exploring identity formation and peer support⁶². Although much of the work on dating apps focuses on specific platforms, and differences between them have received less attention, we found that participants conceived of platforms as part of a spectrum, highlighting a need to study dating apps as part of an ecosystem. In addition, we found that dating app mechanisms for matching can shape experiences in both positive and negative ways, highlighting that while they can somewhat reduce negative experiences, they may also reduce the ability for spontaneous conversations⁶³. Confirming existing work, we found that many participants encountered people with mismatched expectations about what they were looking for and consent, which lead to negative experiences for many of our participants⁶⁴.

Finally, we found that social platforms were often used by our participants in NSFW ways not previously described in HCI, for example, many posted NSFW content publicly or to restricted stories⁶⁵. Although some of our participants were mindful of seeking consent when doing so, a number raised issues around the ways audience curation features, such as Instagram's Close Friends feature, are designed. Building on this, we argue that more consideration needs to be given to consent around audience curation features and the ways social platforms can be used to share NSFW content⁶⁶. However, we also found that many participants enjoyed using social platforms as part of their sexuality. Based on this, and prior critiques in

⁵⁶ See *How idealisation shapes experiences* (§ 6.4, p. 177).

⁵⁷ See *Images of queer men are not diverse* (§ 6.4.1, p. 177).

⁵⁸ See *Relationships to idealised content are complex* (§ 6.4.2, p. 178).

⁵⁹ See *Finding spaces to cheat the need to post idealised content* (§ 6.4.3, p. 178).

⁶⁰ See *Gaining perspective and avoiding triggering content could help participants overcome self-comparison* (§ 6.4.4, p. 179).

⁶¹ See *Dating apps are a double-edged sword* (§ 6.5, p. 180).

⁶² See *Dating apps can be social spaces and linked to other platforms* (§ 6.5.1, p. 180).

⁶³ See *Differing dating app cultures and designs shaped experiences* (§ 6.5.2, p. 181).

⁶⁴ See *Mismatched expectations and issues of consent were common* (§ 6.5.3, p. 182).

⁶⁵ See *Social platforms are used in NSFW ways* (§ 6.6, p. 184).

⁶⁶ See *The need to consider consent around posting of NSFW content* (§ 6.6.1, p. 185).

HCI, we argue that beyond the need to consider NSFW uses of social platforms for safety reasons, that they ought to be studied in their own right ⁶⁷.

In *Part III*, we build on our findings in this part to take a design-led approach to answering the second research question.

⁶⁷ See *Using social platforms as part of sexuality* (§ 6.6.2, p. 186).

Part III

Designing to improve social platform experiences

Chapter 7

Study 3: Using research through design to explore new design directions

This chapter is based on and extends a previously published paper that detailed this study, Armstrong et al. (2024) ¹.

7.1 Introduction

In the previous part, we focused on addressing the first research question and investigated how social platforms shaped the experiences of our participants. As we discussed in the previous chapter, social platforms were vital for participants as a way to learn about their identities and connect to peers ², but there were also issues with their design which contributed to negative experiences. For example, while many social platforms provide affordances for curating audiences, there were often barriers to using them effectively ³. As participants described, dominant ideas around what it means to be a queer man shaped their experiences and social platform design could exacerbate this ⁴. Overwhelmingly, participants described negative experiences on dating apps related to mismatched expectations and unsolicited NSFW content ⁵. Similarly, participants also raised issues around consent on other social platforms ⁶.

In our third study, which we describe in this chapter, we built on our findings in

¹ See *“This is the kind of experience I want to have”: Supporting the experiences of queer young men on social platforms through design* (Armstrong et al., 2024) (§ D.2, p. 327) for a full version of this paper.

² See *Social platforms are vital for developing identity and finding community* (§ 6.2, p. 172).

³ See *Encountering barriers to curation* (§ 6.3.4, p. 176).

⁴ See 6.4.

⁵ See *Dating apps are a double-edged sword* (§ 6.5, p. 180).

⁶ See *The need to consider consent around posting of NSFW content* (§ 6.6.1, p. 185).

response to the first research question, taking a research through design approach to address the second research question. In the first phase of this study, we conducted co-design workshops with people working in technology design to create new concepts for design. We then took these concepts and created mockups which we evaluated in the second phase through a series of evaluations sessions with participants.

This chapter consists of three main sections that describe this study and its findings. We start in section 7.2 by describing our method across both the *Design workshops* (§ 7.2.1, p. 192) and *Evaluation sessions* (§ 7.2.2, p. 194). We then showcase and describe the design mockups we created as part of this study in section 7.3. Finally, we describe the results of the evaluation sessions in section 7.4.

7.2 Method

Similar to the work of others (e.g., Derix et al. (2022)), we conducted this work in two phases, first recruiting professionals working in technology design to generate concepts, then evaluating them with users following a concept-driven or design workbook approach (Gaver, 2011; Stolterman & Wiberg, 2010). In the first phase, we conducted design workshops with participants working in technology design in the San Francisco Bay Area to generate concepts for social platform features, presenting initial findings from Study 2 to act as inspiration for design. In the second phase, we refined these concepts into a series of design mockups (see Table 7.1 for an overview) and presented them in a series of evaluation sessions.

Both the previous study and the evaluation sessions were conducted in Sydney, while the design workshops were conducted in San Francisco. The San Francisco Bay Area is home to the headquarters of many technology companies, and this means that there are many more interaction designers who are experts in their field there than where the author is usually based. We conducted the design workshops there for this reason, and because the author had the opportunity to travel there. While there was a geographic difference between stages, the workshops were grounded in the experiences of Australian participants from Study 2 and did not involve the sharing of technology designers' personal experiences. The resulting concepts were then evaluated in the same context as the original participants.

7.2.1 Design workshops

To generate new concepts for social platform features, we conducted two design workshops. Based on initial findings from Study 2 (*Chapter 5: Study 2*), posters were created for each of the five areas of findings and given to participants so that they could explore them in-depth and at their own pace⁷. The author, who facilitated the workshops, presented an overview of each of the posters at the beginning and answered questions about the findings. This was then followed by

⁷ See Appendix C.1.3: *Findings posters* (p. 305).

co-design activities (detailed in 7.2.1.2).

7.2.1.1 Participants and recruitment

We distributed adverts describing the study on social platforms through the author’s networks and paid placements targeting queer men working in technology design. We also contacted technology designers working in the San Francisco Bay Area to invite them to take part. We found them through his network, by searching on LinkedIn, and through the LGBTQ+ Designer Directory ⁸

The adverts directed to a screening survey to provide contact details and answer questions that would help me determine their eligibility, similar to previous studies. As we sought to recruit professional designers, we asked prospective participants to describe their professional experience and interest in the study. This allowed me to select participants based on their level of experience and screen out candidates who we did not think were qualified to be involved. Additionally there was a question asking whether they identified with the group being designed for, queer men.

Participants were invited to attend based on their professional experience and provided with more information about the study. Participants were provided with a document following the standard university human research template, which outlined involvement, risks and how their data would be treated. Before commencing the co-design workshop, participants signed a consent form. ⁸ participants attended the first workshop and 5 the second. Participants all worked in technology design, 6 at FAANG ⁹ companies, 5 as senior designers or above, 3 as designers, 2 as software engineers involved in UX design as well as a senior research engineer, a product manager and an accessibility engineer. All participants were queer men, 6 were white, 5 were Asian, and 2 were Latino.

7.2.1.2 Co-design activities

Both workshops ran for approximately two and a half hours, with participants working in small groups to complete activities. Workshops followed the same structure and started with a 20 minute introduction, including a 5 minutes icebreaker activity before the author presented the findings posters. In the following 45 minutes, participants wrote on post-it notes, and in some cases sketched, initial ideas for social platform features that responded to the findings. The author clustered the ideas during a break, and in the second half, gave participants groups of them to develop into concepts in the 45 minutes that followed. Concept sheets were given to participants to provide a structured way for them to flesh out concepts, including providing a name, rationale, description, sketches and evaluations ¹⁰. The workshops ended with a 30 minute closing discussion that asked participants to reflect on the concepts they had created. In his role as a facilitator,

⁸ Queer Design Club. 2021. “LGBTQ+ Designer Directory.” 2021. <https://www.queerdesign.club/directory>.

⁹ Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Google

¹⁰ See Appendix C.1.4: *Concept sheet* (p. 310).

the author helped guide the workshops and engaged in discussions with participants but did not directly participate in the activities beyond this.

7.2.2 Evaluation sessions

Concepts developed in the design workshops were refined and then evaluated with 15 local participants in one of three group evaluation sessions. This follows concept-driven Stolterman and Wiberg, 2010 and design workbook Gaver, 2011 approaches as a form of participant engagement, which use designed mockups as a way to ground explorations of theoretical proposals.

7.2.2.1 Participants and recruitment

Recruitment for the evaluation sessions followed the same format as Study 2¹¹. We distributed adverts describing the evaluation sessions through the author's networks and paid placements. The adverts directed people to a screening survey to provide contact details and answer screening questions relating to eligibility. We also invited participants from Study 2 (see *Chapter 5: Study 2*), 5 of whom participated in this phase of the research as well.

After selecting participants to be involved, we then contacted them to thank them for registering, to provide further information and to ask which of the evaluation sessions they were able to attend. Participants were provided with a document following the standard university human research template, which outlined involvement, risks and how their data would be treated. Before commencing the session, participants signed a consent form.

3 participants attended the first evaluation session, 7 the second and 5 the third. 11 participants were cisgender while 4 were trans. 10 identified as white or European, 3 as Asian, 1 as Latino and 1 as mixed-race European and Pacific. The youngest participant was 19, and the oldest was 28.

7.2.2.2 Creating mockups

Based on the ideas and concepts generated in the design workshops, we created a number of mockups to evaluate with participants¹². We started by visually mapping and clustering the concepts and ideas generated. From this, we selected concepts we thought would be the most supportive of queer young men's experiences to be further developed. Then, we refined the concepts through sketching before creating mockups using Figma¹³. In the process, we drew on the concept sheets completed at the workshops.

Many of the concepts created in the design workshops were based on Instagram and Grindr. Similarly, in creating the refined mockups, we designed them as features for these apps. Instagram and Grindr were the two social platforms participants talked

¹¹ See *Participant recruitment* (§ 5.2.3, p. 71).

¹² See *Design mockups* (§ 7.3, p. 196)

¹³ Figma, Inc. 2024. Figma. <https://figma.com>

about most in the previous study and are very commonly used. By basing the mockups on these apps, the features could be shown in less abstract ways and in contexts that participants in the evaluation sessions were already familiar with.

We chose to create static mockups of the concepts to present participants because prototyping functional social platform experiences was infeasible. Additionally, we thought that creating interactive prototypes would make conducting group evaluation sessions much more difficult, while not offering much benefit. Even if we had decided to create interactive prototypes, we would not have been able to evaluate them in ways that did not rely on a simulated context that participants would have had to translate back to their real-world experiences through reflection. The APIs for many of the platforms participants described are very limited or non-existent so it would have been very technically challenging or impossible to use real content or data as part of any prototypes, to mention nothing of ethical and privacy concerns this would raise. In addition, many of the concepts aim to shape interactions between strangers, and this is difficult to recreate, especially if simulated interactions have to be used because there is not a way to simply provide people a new interface on top of the platforms they use. For example, it would be challenging to test in an evaluation session if a new design for an existing dating app limits the number of first messages that are unsolicited explicit photos, and it is unlikely that people would behave in such ways under observation, even if we created a brand new fully functional dating app for evaluation purposes.

7.2.2.3 Evaluation session activities

Evaluation sessions lasted approximately 2 hours. They started with a brief introduction to the session and an icebreaker before the author led participants through evaluations of each of the design mockups. Worksheets that described and showcased the mockups were given to participants¹⁴. The worksheets also had space for participants to rate each concept, provide justification for their rating and suggest improvements.

Mockups were presented in the same groups as they are in this thesis (see Table 7.1). For each group, the author explained them and then gave participants time to explore them and complete the worksheet. In the second and third sessions, at which numbers allowed, participants worked in 2-3 person groups, discussing the mockups and completing the worksheets collaboratively. The author would then lead a discussion where participants shared their thoughts. When discussion had been exhausted, the process was repeated with the next group of mockups.

Using worksheets had multiple benefits. Participants could draw on and annotate the mockups with comments. They allowed time for structured reflection and exploration before the discussion. Finally, they also provided a useful resource during analysis where points that had not been raised in the discussion were found.

¹⁴ See Appendix C.2.3: *Worksheets* (p. 315).

Table 7.1: Overview of mockups

Group of design concepts	Mock-up	Designed for
7.3.1 Design concepts that block unwanted messages	7.3.1.1 New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics	Grindr
	7.3.1.2 Block repeated messages	Grindr
7.3.2 Design concepts that help align expectations	7.3.2.1 Providing more control over who can find and message you	Grindr
	7.3.2.2 Signalling what you are looking for	Grindr
7.3.3 Design concepts that help people use dating apps	7.3.3.1 Grindr Bot	Grindr
7.3.4 Design concepts for improving agency over what you see and share	7.3.4.1 Smart social circles	Instagram
	7.3.4.2 Focus modes for content feeds	Instagram
7.3.5 Design concepts for finding connection to community	7.3.5.1 Suggested topics	Instagram
	7.3.5.2 Local Guide	Grindr

7.2.2.4 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Similar to the previous studies, we used Reflexive Thematic Analysis¹⁵. We transcribed the workshop recordings as part of the data familiarisation process. We then used Atlas.ti¹⁶ to code the transcripts and completed worksheets in an inductive and iterative way that described the semantic meaning communicated by participants and the latent meaning we interpreted from what they described. This reflects the constructionist epistemological approach taken in this work, which values the researcher’s subjectivity Braun and Clarke, 2021. After initial coding, we organised and refined the codes. We then used the resulting codes to create initial themes. Throughout this process, the author consulted with his doctoral supervisors, who, through discussion, contributed to refining the initial codes and developing, naming and organising themes.

7.3 Design mockups

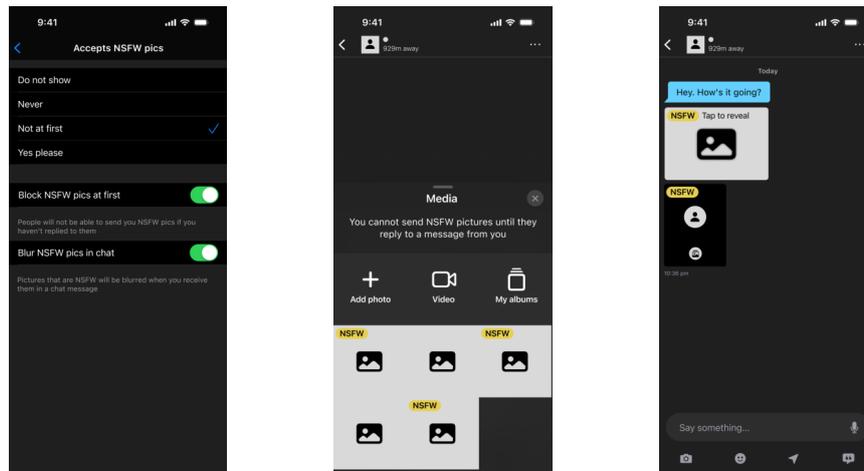
In this section, we describe the design mockups presented to participants in the evaluation sessions. See Table 7.1 for an overview.

7.3.1 Design concepts that block unwanted messages

On dating apps such as Tinder, one must “match” with someone before any messages can be exchanged. However, dating apps such as Grindr allow anyone to message. While this has positives, receiving unwanted messages, especially unsolicited explicit pictures, is a common problem Dietzel, 2024. These concepts

¹⁵ See *Reflexive thematic analysis* (§ 3.5.2, p. 46) where we describe our approach.

¹⁶ See *Tool use: Atlas.ti* (§ 3.5.3, p. 47).



(a) New options for blocking or blurring NSFW pictures are given alongside the existing profile options.

(b) If blocking is enabled, people will be blocked from sending NSFW pics at first. To make this clear, a new message is shown when sending pictures, and a new NSFW label highlights which pictures the app has identified as being explicit.

(c) If blurring is enabled, NSFW pics will be blurred until the user taps to open them.

Figure 7.1: Mockups of a Grindr interface for New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics (§ 7.3.1.1)

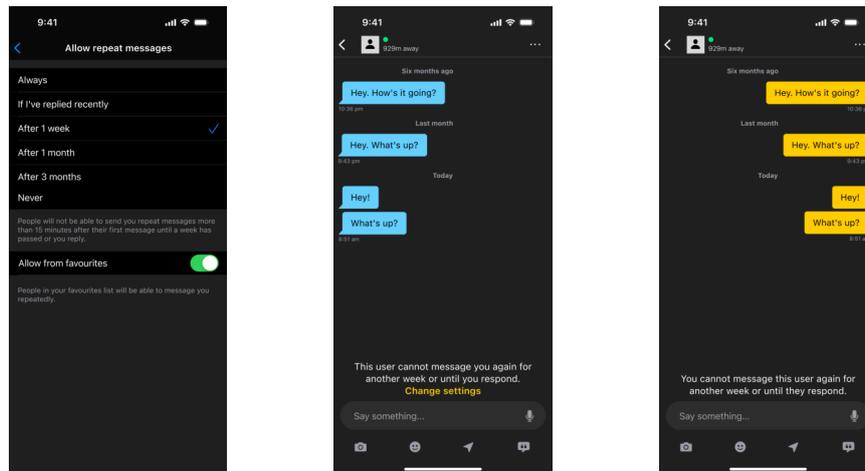
offer users more control over how people can message them.

7.3.1.1 New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics

(Figure 7.1) Some platforms, for example, Instagram, hide pictures sent by those one is not following by default – that way, users can decide if they want to reveal what may be a problematic image from an unknown other. Alternatively, some platforms, such as Tinder, do not allow pictures or videos to be sent at all. On the other hand, some do not mind receiving NSFW content, especially on dating apps where they may see it as part of facilitating sexual encounters with those they interact with Dietzel, 2024; Zytko et al., 2021. Some platforms, such as Grindr, recognise variation in whether users would like to receive NSFW content – they offer three profile options for communicating one’s openness to receiving NSFW pictures, “yes please”, “not at first” and “never”. While this allows users to explicitly consent, or not, it relies on someone being proactive enough to check before deciding whether to send NSFW content. This allows users to automatically block or blur NSFW pics.

7.3.1.2 Block repeated messages

(Figure 7.2) A common complaint on dating apps such as Grindr that do not have “matching” processes is receiving repeated messages from the same user. This concept allows users to limit how often people can message them. There’s an option



(a) New options for blocking repeated messages. People will have a 15-minute window to send messages before it becomes a repeat message.

(b) If enabled, a new notice will show when someone is blocked from sending messages and provide users with the option to change their settings.

(c) A new notice is displayed when someone is blocked from sending new messages.

Figure 7.2: Mockups of a Grindr interface for Block repeated messages (§ 7.3.1.2)

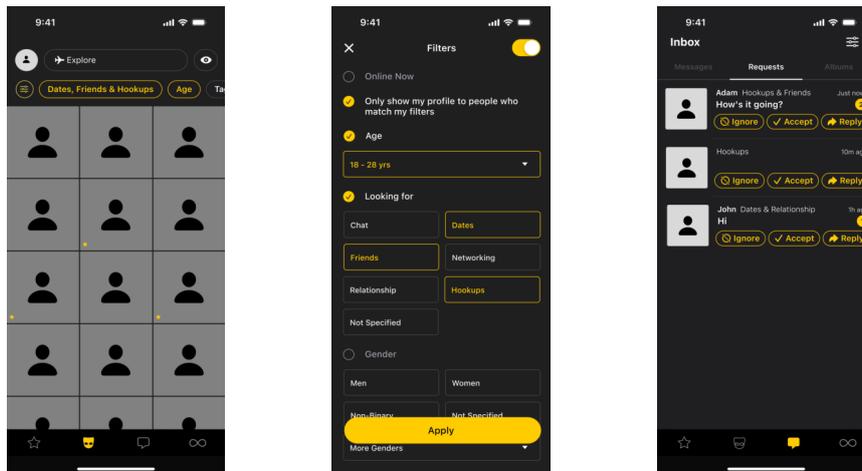
to allow repeat messages from people in their favourites.

7.3.2 Design concepts that help align expectations

Dating apps are particularly important places of connection for queer young men and are used for a variety of reasons Blackwell et al., 2015; Byron et al., 2021. However, mismatched expectations can cause issues and many face abuse or harassment Dietzel, 2024; Wongsomboon et al., 2023; Zytka et al., 2021. These concepts offer ways to better align expectations.

7.3.2.1 Providing more control over who can find and message you

(Figure 7.3) A common feature of dating apps is offering users a way to filter the profiles they see. On matching-based apps such as Tinder, this affects not only the profiles of others presented to a user but also who the user is presented to. On apps such as Grindr, the filters a user selects do not limit their visibility to others, meaning that someone outside their filters is able to contact them. This concept changes Looking For from a static profile field and makes it a filter so that it is easier to change based on what users are after each time they use the app. It also allows the option for filters to be bi-directional. Finally, it shows messages from people they have not interacted with in a separate tab as message requests.



(a) What users are looking for is now highlighted at the top of their filters.

(b) New option to limit who can see users to those within their filters. Looking For is more prominent instead.

(c) A new requests tab shows messages from people users have not interacted with before.

Figure 7.3: Mockups of a Grindr interface for Providing more control over who can find and message you (§ 7.3.2.1)

7.3.2.2 Signalling what you are looking for

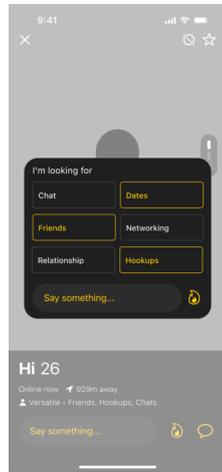
(Figure 7.4) What someone is looking for can vary depending on who they are talking to, so this concept allows users to tailor what their profile shows under Looking For. When messaging someone for the first time, users are prompted to say what they are looking for. In the chat window users can now see both others and their own Looking For and NSFW picture preferences so expectations are clearer.

7.3.3 Design concepts that help people use dating apps

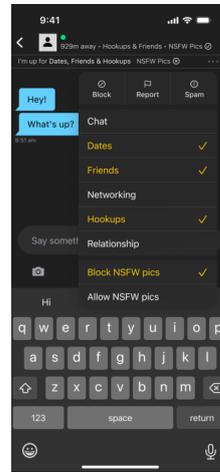
Sometimes dating apps can be overwhelming, especially when first joining and if users are unsure who to ask for help getting started Wongsomboon et al., 2023. People also have different expectations of how to behave on the apps. The concept below explores how a chatbot could help address these issues.

7.3.3.1 Grindr Bot

(Figure 7.5) This concept explores what a dating app chatbot could look like. When users first install the app, it helps onboard them. They can also ask it questions they have. Finally, it prompts users when it thinks they are going to do something that might be disrespectful.



(a) New modal for users to signal what they are looking for when they message/tap someone. This defaults to their current Looking For but can be customised.



(b) The chat window now shows both users' expectations for Looking For and NSFW. Users can change this at any time using the dropdown menu.

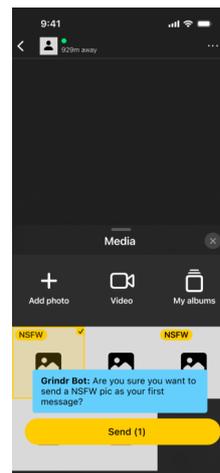
Figure 7.4: Mockups of a Grindr interface for Signalling what you are looking for (§ 7.3.2.2)



(a) When users sign up, Grindr Bot welcomes them to the app and makes sure people are aware of the Community Guidelines.

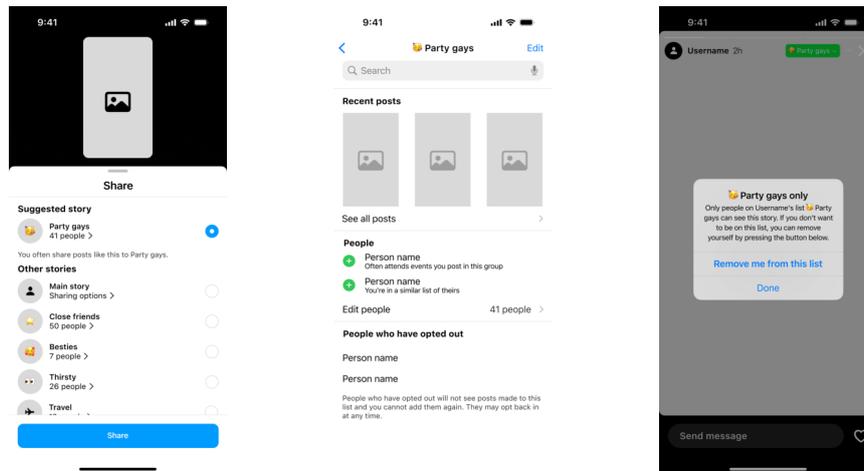


(b) Users can ask Grindr Bot questions, for example, if they do not understand something.



(c) Grindr Bot prompts people when they are about to do something that might be disrespectful.

Figure 7.5: Mockups of a Grindr interface for Grindr Bot (§ 7.3.3.1)



(a) When posting a story, users can now pick from a number of lists. A suggestion is made for which list to share it to, and other lists are shown below.

(b) A new edit list interface. Users can see recent posts, get suggestions for who to add and see who has opted out.

(c) When viewing a story shared to a private list, users can see the name of the list as well as opt out of it.

Figure 7.6: Mockups for Instagram for Smart social circles (§ 7.3.4.1)

7.3.4 Design concepts for improving agency over what you see and share

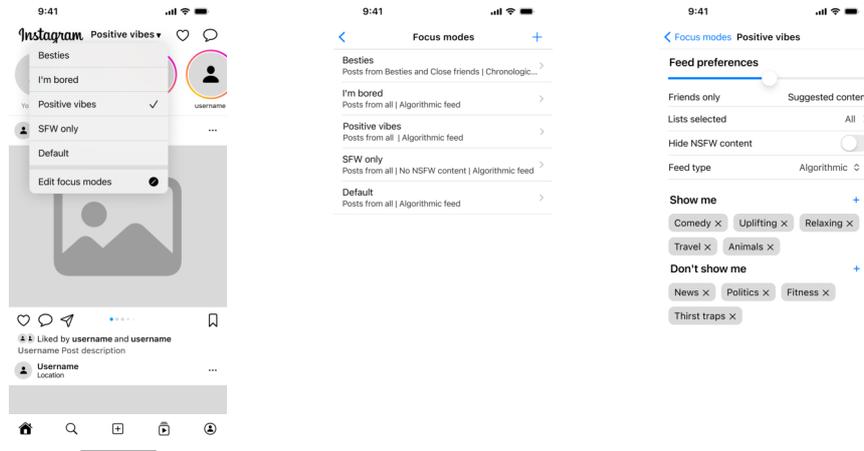
These concepts give users more agency over the content they see and the audiences for content that they share.

7.3.4.1 Smart social circles

(Figure 7.6) Many social apps have ways to filter the audience of posts users make; for example, Instagram has Close Friends. However, such features often allow for only one list, which can be problematic. This concept allows users to create multiple lists and uses AI to suggest lists when posting, as well as people to include in them. This mock-up shows stories but this could also be an option when making posts.

7.3.4.2 Focus modes for content feeds

(Figure 7.7) At the moment, many apps offer an algorithmic feed or a chronological one. While there are options to filter out content from algorithmic feeds this is often static Im et al., 2021 and there is little control over what one sees in the moment. This concept allows users to create customisable focus modes over the content that gets presented to them. They can choose how much content is from friends or suggested, allow or block NSFW content, set the feed type to chronological or algorithmic as well as set what kinds of content they do or do not want to see.



(a) Users can select a focus mode to change what the algorithm presents them.

(b) Users can create focus modes that suit different moods or contexts.

(c) Each mode is customisable.

Figure 7.7: Mockups for Instagram for Focus modes for content feeds (§ 7.3.4.2)

7.3.5 Design concepts for finding connection to community

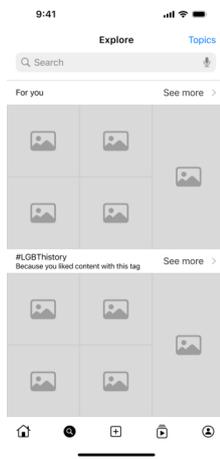
Social platforms often offer LGBTQ+ young people ways to learn about being queer or trans and connect to others in the LGBTQ+ community Byron et al., 2021; Fox and Ralston, 2016; McConnell et al., 2017. These concepts try to support this.

7.3.5.1 Suggested topics

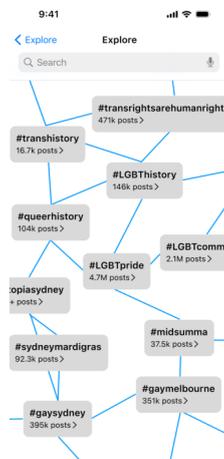
(Figure 7.8) This concept would make it easier to explore topics related to the content one sees. This example shows how it could help uncover LGBT history content, but this could happen for any kind of content and provide a way to more actively explore communities.

7.3.5.2 Local Guide

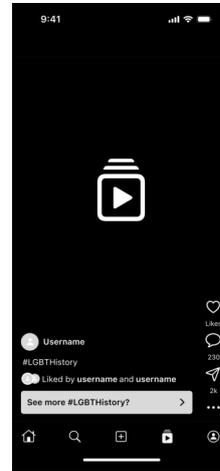
(Figure 7.9) Maybe a user is in a new city or just wants to get more involved in the local LGBTQ+ community where they are. This concept showcases a new explore feature for Grindr that lets users find out about a city and its LGBTQ+ events, places and support services. It also helps them find people who are local or perhaps just passing through.



(a) The Explore page has a new section that shows suggested topics.

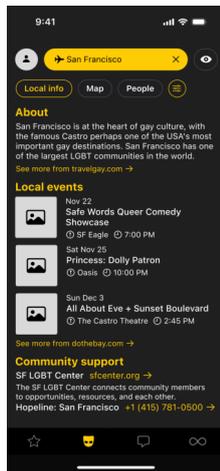


(b) Users can explore topics in a new network view.

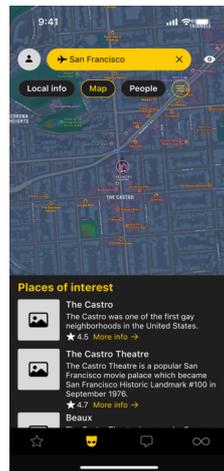


(c) Suggested topics are highlighted on related content to encourage users to explore more.

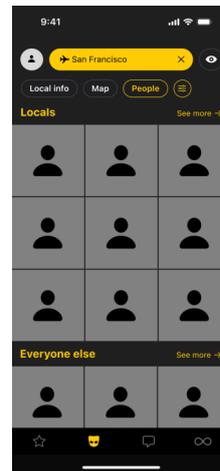
Figure 7.8: Mockups for Instagram for Suggested topics (§ 7.3.5.1)



(a) The local info page gives information about a city, LGBTQ+ events that are on and community support services.



(b) The map page shows a map of LGBTQ+ places users can explore.



(c) The people page lets users find people based on whether they are local or not. Maybe they want to find someone who knows the city well or a fellow traveller to explore with.

Figure 7.9: Mockups for Instagram for Local Guide (§ 7.3.5.2)

7.4 Findings

Through our analysis, we developed a number of themes related to participants responses to the mockups. We present these as part of four overarching themes:

- *Providing more opportunities for consent and clarifying expectations* (§ 7.4.1, p. 204).
- *Providing more agency over self-presentation* (§ 7.4.2, p. 209).
- *Providing transparency and control over automated, algorithmic and AI features* (§ 7.4.3, p. 211).
- *Providing ways to connect with local communities* (§ 7.4.4, p. 215).

7.4.1 Providing more opportunities for consent and clarifying expectations

Participants greatly appreciated features that gave them agency over the kinds of interactions they had, particularly on dating apps. This overarching theme explores participants' responses to features designed to address issues of consent and mismatched expectations. We do this across five themes:

- *Providing more agency over receiving or viewing NSFW pictures* (§ 7.4.1.1, p. 204).
- *Supporting people to communicate what they are looking for and expectations in dynamic ways* (§ 7.4.1.2, p. 205).
- *Building consent into features that target audiences* (§ 7.4.1.3, p. 207).
- *Helping people connect more easily with matches but not blocking those who do not fit filters* (§ 7.4.1.4, p. 207).
- *Limiting repeated messages could be beneficial* (§ 7.4.1.5, p. 208).

7.4.1.1 Providing more agency over receiving or viewing NSFW pictures

Participants overwhelmingly liked the ability the mock-up, *New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics* (§ 7.3.1.1, p. 197, Figure 7.1), provided them to block NSFW pictures. One participant did not use Grindr because of how common it is to be sent NSFW pictures and said that were this feature available, he would start using the app. Similarly, participants liked the ability to toggle blocking NSFW pictures within a chat as afforded by *Signalling what you are looking for* (§ 7.3.2.2, see Figure 7.4b, p. 200). Currently, Grindr allows users to specify their preference for receiving NSFW pictures as “never”, “not at first” or “yes please”. While the first and last options are clear, “not at first” may be ambiguous, and this ability to signal gives agency to users to communicate when and if they are happy to receive them.

The main concerns around features that block NSFW content were related to how

the app would identify NSFW content ¹⁷. Additionally, some participants expressed that they are happy to receive NSFW pictures. However, they appreciated that others would benefit and were not opposed to their existence.

The automatic blurring of NSFW pictures shown in *New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics* (§ 7.3.1.1, p. 197, Figure 7.1) was also popular with participants. As they noted, blurring all pictures, by default, is a simpler solution than detecting whether they are NSFW. However, it still provides agency to users to decide whether they want to see a picture. One participant noted that Instagram by default already blurs pictures from people one does not follow.

“it gives you a blurry version of it. And then you can go, ‘That’s a dick. I’m not going to look at it.’ But like, if you look at it and it’s like purple, you’re like, ‘Okay, that’s not a dick.’” [Evaluation session two]

The desire to control receiving NSFW pictures could also be situational. Participants described situations where they thought the blur function would be beneficial, for example, when using Grindr in a public place. Similarly, participants appreciated the ways *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) could help them sanitise their content feeds in situations where it would not be appropriate for NSFW content to appear. One group suggested making this more accessible by including a toggle they could quickly use to remove NSFW content from their feed.

7.4.1.2 Supporting people to communicate what they are looking for and expectations in dynamic ways

A common reason that participants liked *New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics* (§ 7.3.1.1, p. 197, Figure 7.1) and *Signalling what you are looking for* (§ 7.3.2.2, p. 199, Figure 7.4) was that they would make their expectations around receiving NSFW content and what they are looking for very clear to other users.

“I quite like this feature in that, I mean, the intent of Grindr is to find people quickly, whether you’re dating or hooking up, it’s trying to get to a connection as quick as possible. And I feel like this helps you get there. It’s not a tap, it’s not a vague emoji. It’s ‘I’m looking for this, this and this with you.’” [Evaluation session three]

While Grindr profiles can already show what a user is looking for and whether they consent to receiving NSFW pics, it is common for profiles to be ignored. Participants liked that *New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics* (§ 7.3.1.1, p. 197, Figure 7.1) would prevent people from ignoring their preferences and sending NSFW content anyway and that *Signalling what you are looking for* (§ 7.3.2.2, see Figure 7.4b, p. 200) puts what they are looking for and their preferences in a very obvious place at the top of the chat screen. In addition, participants thought it

¹⁷ These and other concerns related to automated features are discussed in section *Concerns about automatic, algorithmic or AI filtering and classification* (§ 7.4.3.3, p. 214).

would be helpful to see signals from others which would help them decide how to interact, for example, when talking to someone who is only looking for hookups compared to someone who is interested in dates.

“I also like that it’s– there’s a flag at the top. So, depending– regardless of how many conversations you’ve had, you’re reminded constantly based on a specific prompt that they’ve input into the system, what they’re looking for. So you might not have messaged them for a month or two, and you instantly know what they’re looking for. I think that’s beneficial.” [Evaluation session three]

Participants also liked the ability that *Signalling what you are looking for* (§ 7.3.2.2, p. 199, Figure 7.4) would provide them to adjust their expectations for specific users as they could vary depending on who they were talking to as well as their current mood and situation. Some participants suggested that there should be a way to signal on their profile what they are looking for in that moment separately to what they are generally looking for, for example, if they are temporarily open to hookups. Participants also noted that being able to signal to specific users could allow someone who is reluctant to put what they are actually looking for on their profile to more accurately present themselves to someone they are talking to.

Participants much preferred the option to change their expectations within the chat window at a time of their choosing (see Figure 7.4b, p. 200) compared to when beginning an interaction with someone (see Figure 7.4a, p. 200). Some thought that customising this for each new interaction was overkill. Others highlighted that they often do not know what to expect before interacting. The third evaluation session had an in-depth discussion between participants about how it would look when someone changes what they are looking for with you. One suggestion made in the third evaluation session was to prompt users at some point during a conversation to signal their expectations to the other. However, when asked about when this would occur, the consensus was that it would be very difficult to determine when it would be appropriate for the app to do so and that a set time or message count threshold could be too arbitrary.

“Will they notice if you change that criteria based on their messages and based on the conversation that you have, like will they go, oh you initially had like hookups selected and now we’ve exchanged our messages and you’ve changed it to chats. Like, are they gonna be butt-hurt about it? Is someone gonna be super noticeable?” [Evaluation session three]

Interestingly, participants thought that regardless of whether they changed the expectations signalled to another user, that their profile should still state their general preferences and not be overridden. However, some commented that this might lead them to be more conservative on their profile so that when signalling, they are more likely to add something they are looking for than to remove

something.

“I think the benefit of this is that it’s short-cutting communication. So, yes, they might have one thing on their profile, but they made it clear that they’re only looking for chats with you” [Evaluation session three]

7.4.1.3 Building consent into features that target audiences

Building more consent into features that target audiences was another area where participants appreciated increased agency over seeing NSFW pictures. The ability to opt-out of someone’s private list for stories, as shown in *Smart social circles* (§ 7.3.4.1, see Figure 7.6c, p. 201), was widely desired. However, a number of participants suggested that this did not go far enough and wanted private stories to be opt-in. During discussions about how opting in could work, the author suggested being prompted the first time a private story appears and received the following response:

“Yeah, of course. ‘cause it’s just like, instead of just being shown. Like for example, if you’re just swiping, it would just go to someone’s Close Friends without any choice of whose Close Friends you’re gonna see next, or for the first time. And so like obviously now if I get that opt-in to like, oh, are you happy to join this person’s ‘booty pics’ [private story], then you’re allowing, you know, whatever group you’re added into, if you’re given that choice, then it’s a safe mechanism to not be shown anything that you don’t want to see.” [Evaluation workshop one]

One participant noted, however, that such a feature may be undermined by people naming and using their private lists in a way that suggests they will be safe for work but then later posting NSFW content. One suggestion was to provide the option to blur NSFW content by default on platforms such as Instagram. Another suggestion was based on the way Instagram currently highlights Close Friends stories by making the circle that appears around a user’s profile picture in the stories section green; NSFW stories could be highlighted in a different colour to make it obvious.

7.4.1.4 Helping people connect more easily with matches but not blocking those who do not fit filters

Participants were broadly in favour of the filtering mechanisms in *Providing more control over who can find and message you* (§ 7.3.2.1, p. 198, Figure 7.3). Some participants appreciated the ability to restrict those who do not match their filters to interact with them. The main reasoning was that it could help save them time and improve their experiences. For example, one participant liked that this would enable them to block anyone just looking for hookups. On the other hand, a participant who uses Grindr solely to find hookups did not see a benefit in the concept.

However, there were concerns over how aggressive the filtering could be. While the design of *Providing more control over who can find and message you* (§ 7.3.2.1, see

Figure 7.3c, p. 199) sends all messages from people a user has not interacted with to a “Requests” tab, participants disagreed with whether this was a desirable approach or not. There was a broad consensus, however, that message requests should only appear for those who do not match one’s filters. Some thought that separating message requests would mean that they were likely to miss new requests and preferred that they be shown alongside regular conversation threads in the main tab. Others appreciated keeping message requests separate and thought that they might occasionally check to see any from those outside their filters.

Similar to concerns raised about overzealously filtering out content or other people discussed below ¹⁸, there was also a desire to be able to see how restrictive the filters they select are.

“I would love some transparency over how much of the, for lack of a better word field, I’m excluding by filtering in whatever way I am.”
[Evaluation session 3]

Part of the desire to keep message requests alongside existing conversation threads was an awareness of the many discreet profiles that exist on Grindr. While participants expressed that blank or discreet profiles can have a bad reputation on the app, they noted that many have privacy concerns related to being identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community. They saw it as important to support their use of the app and worried that showing message requests separately would make it more difficult for discreet users of the app to interact with others.

Similarly, many participants recognised that there could be benefits to people who do not match their exact filters interacting with them.

“Do these explicit filters that cut people out change the dynamic of Grindr to being not just a place where you meet people or explore things that you might not have been entirely open to? But because that one person who doesn’t maybe fit all of your preconceived filters, but does fit what you find attractive slips through, would this then stop that from happening?” [Evaluation session two]

7.4.1.5 Limiting repeated messages could be beneficial

Participants had mixed feelings about *Block repeated messages* (§ 7.3.1.2, p. 197, Figure 7.2). A number expressed their disdain for often receiving repeat messages from people they have not responded to. Feeling that manually blocking people entirely could be too harsh, some thought this would stop them from receiving annoying repeat messages in a nicer way.

In contrast to participants’ thoughts on wanting others to see both their general expectations and those that have been signalled to them in particular as part of *Signalling what you are looking for* (§ 7.3.2.2, p. 199, Figure 7.4) ¹⁹, it was thought

¹⁸ See *Concerns about automatic, algorithmic or AI filtering and classification* (§ 7.4.3.3, p. 214).

¹⁹ See *Supporting people to communicate what they are looking for and expectations in dynamic*

that telling participants that they had been blocked as in *Block repeated messages* (§ 7.3.1.2, see Figure 7.2c, p. 198) might be unnecessarily harsh. However, participants in multiple evaluation sessions suggested that a nudge from *Grindr Bot* (§ 7.3.3.1, see Figure 7.5c, p. 200) that asks users if they are sure they want to send a repeated message could be helpful.

Similar to other mockups²⁰, some participants had concerns about an automated filter restricting messages that they actually wanted to receive. For example, some participants shared that they are bad at keeping on top of messages and that even if they have not responded to someone, this does not necessarily mean they are not interested in them. Instead, some participants thought it would be more beneficial to have a mute function on Grindr, similar to other social platforms where they could mute specific people.

7.4.2 Providing more agency over self-presentation

In this overarching theme, we explore themes relating to participants' desires for greater affordances over the visibility of the content they post, and ways to elude visibility. We do this across two themes:

- *Allowing for greater selective visibility* (§ 7.4.2.1, p. 209).
- *Providing ways to elude visibility* (§ 7.4.2.2, p. 210).

7.4.2.1 Allowing for greater selective visibility

Participants liked the ability to create multiple private audience lists shown in *Smart social circles* (§ 7.3.4.1, p. 201, Figure 7.6) so they could better target the audience of their posts. The way that *Smart social circles* (§ 7.3.4.1, see Figure 7.6a, p. 201) suggests a list to post to was also appreciated as a way to reduce the chances of posting to the wrong list. Participants noted, however, that there might be overlaps between groups and that it would be good to be able to share something to multiple lists.

A suggested improvement for *Smart social circles* (§ 7.3.4.1, p. 201, Figure 7.6) was to add a way to exclude specific people from seeing their content as well. Currently, Instagram allows people to be blocked from seeing all of one's stories, but this would do so for particular stories. Participants cited various examples where they would want to be able to do this including when organising a surprise for a friend, wanting to post a thirst trap but hide it from specific people or to more openly express their queerness. Similarly, some participants suggested that there should also be an option to restrict screenshots.

“my parents are pretty transphobic and I want to post something that's trans-related, but I want everyone except my mom to see it.”

[Evaluation session two]

ways (§ 7.4.1.2, p. 205).

²⁰ See *Concerns about automatic, algorithmic or AI filtering and classification* (§ 7.4.3.3, p. 214).

There were concerns, however, about the amount of effort it may take to manage lists. Additionally, some participants highlighted that they might create lists for more mundane content they did not want to “spam” everyone with. They suggested an option to make lists publicly visible so that any of their followers could opt-in.

“So you can post on your public story and be like, ‘Hey, if you want to join this story to find out more about what video game I’m playing or how I’m doing with my mental health or whatever, then feel free to join that.’ So perhaps to have certain lists that can be joined by public and other lists that you have to control and be added to in order to actually see what’s on there.” [Evaluation session three]

7.4.2.2 Providing ways to elude visibility

Throughout discussions of concepts, participants noted ways in which they wanted more ability to elude visibility.

In discussions around *Providing more control over who can find and message you* (§ 7.3.2.1, p. 198, Figure 7.3) participants highlighted that they were often reluctant to view people’s profiles on Grindr. By default, the app alerts people when someone has opened their profile through a “Viewed Me” list shown in the title bar of the app. One participant suggested that this is particularly problematic when trying to ascertain what someone is looking for to see if they are compatible. However, while participants could be reluctant to trigger the notification for other users, some shared how they appreciated being able to see who had viewed them. As a way around this, they suggested the main grid view of profiles (see Figure 7.3a, p. 199) in Grindr show icons that indicate what someone is looking for.

As discussed in above ²¹, participants noted the importance of supporting those who wish to be discreet and elude being identifiable to other users before interacting. Also discussed is the way that *Signalling what you are looking for* (§ 7.3.2.2, p. 199, Figure 7.4) could support this by allowing people to specify a more conservative version of what they are looking for on their profile and communicate the full story to a specific user they interact with.

Participants liked the ability to explore in *Suggested topics* (§ 7.3.5.1, p. 202, Figure 7.8). However, they raised concerns about whether others would be able to see what they were looking at.

“Don’t make it public. Like right now if I follow an hashtag [on Instagram], you can see what I am following, which I don’t mind. I don’t have anything to hide. But some people, again, in some places of the world, do not want to be shown [as] following LGBT” [Evaluation session one]

Similarly, one participant noted that many people have main Instagram accounts

²¹ See *Supporting people to communicate what they are looking for and expectations in dynamic ways* (§ 7.4.1.2, p. 205).

and separate accounts where they are more happy to follow others who post NSFW content. He thought that *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) could help consolidate these Instagram accounts, however, he noted that an important function of people using separate accounts in this way is obscuring who one is following from the audience of the main account. Accordingly, he emphasised that *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) should be designed in a way that allows users to elude visibility.

7.4.3 Providing transparency and control over automated, algorithmic and AI features

In this overarching theme, we present participant responses to automatic, algorithmic and AI features in the mockups. We do this across three themes:

- *Providing control over algorithmic content feeds* (§ 7.4.3.1, p. 211).
- *Using AI to support understanding* (§ 7.4.3.2, p. 213).
- *Concerns about automatic, algorithmic or AI filtering and classification* (§ 7.4.3.3, p. 214).

7.4.3.1 Providing control over algorithmic content feeds

Participants generally liked the concept of *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7), which would provide them with more agency over how algorithms present content to them. A common sentiment was that user-tuned algorithms would be better at presenting content that they wanted to see. Accordingly, the ability for user customisation was popular when discussing *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7).

“I really like that you can customise each of those categories even further. It’s not just what Instagram thinks is positive vibes, it’s what you specifically want when you select that tab.” [Evaluation session three]

While not the original intention of *Suggested topics* (§ 7.3.5.1, see Figure 7.8b, p. 203), some participants saw its network view as a way to visualise the model being used to generate the algorithmic content feeds they see. Similarly, participants in the first evaluation session wanted a way to see judgements of interest made by platforms and correct them.

“I’d love to know, or I’d love to even just be more conscious in what kind of subcultures I’m not interested in participating in, or ones that I want to subscribe to more. And having a networked way of seeing it.” [Evaluation session three]

Participants appreciated that the design of *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) would allow them to alter their algorithm dynamically to suit their mood.

“I think that it’s such a dream that we’d be able to go into a platform and be like, ‘This is the kind of experience I want to have on here today’” [Evaluation session three]

This could be beneficial when wanting to explore beyond what their algorithm was presenting them. For example, some participants also saw *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) as a way to influence the algorithm when they got bored. Similarly, participants liked the way *Suggested topics* (§ 7.3.5.1, p. 202, Figure 7.8) could provide new ways to explore content and some thought that it could help them grow by exposing them to informational content.

“It’s kind of nice to be able to choose what rabbit-hole you go down... and if I keep scrolling down after I click on that, I find more of what I want. It’s an easier way I think to, I think Instagram has such issues with the search engine.” [Evaluation session three]

Part of the rationale for *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) was that it could allow users to create what participants in the first co-design workshop referred to as a “mental health algorithm”. Participants in the evaluation sessions agreed that it could be helpful for their mental health, and some thought that it would help make the app less addictive.

“I think it would be great, especially if like you’re in the like down the like oh I don’t want to see abs today I want to see kittens” [Evaluation session two]

On the other hand, some participants highlighted that they often enjoy seeing what the algorithm presents them and that they would likely alternate between using a targeted focus mode and not.

“I like the randomness of going on there and then whatever comes. Sometimes it is nice to see what your friends are doing, because you might get distracted by [algorithmic posts]. So I like both.” [Evaluation session one]

While *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, see Figure 7.7c, p. 202) already offers a slider to control how much algorithmically suggested content is inserted into one’s feed, one participant also suggested that this could be done at a more granular level.

“I would want to see a certain percentage of my besties and a certain percentage of positive vibes” [Evaluation session three]

Although participants saw value in using *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7), some described how they thought it seemed unrealistic that social platforms would provide too much control to people over the content they are shown.

7.4.3.2 Using AI to support understanding

Participants particularly liked the way *Grindr Bot* (§ 7.3.3.1, see Figure 7.5b, p. 200) could support understanding. They saw it as especially beneficial in helping new users understand the culture of the app and the slang that people use. Beyond this, participants also saw *Grindr Bot* (§ 7.3.3.1, p. 199, Figure 7.5) as a way for people to get support by connecting them to local services and community, similar to what was shown in *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, see Figure 7.9a, p. 203) to providing a virtual companion.

“a lot of people don’t have a support circle, like friends, [if they’re] in the closet and they don’t have a support circle and this could be it for them... like it would just be like a friend that you can just talk to, ask questions.” [Evaluation session one]

While some appreciated the way *Grindr Bot* (§ 7.3.3.1, see Figure 7.5c, p. 200) could prompt users before doing something that could be disrespectful, others had a strong preference for the feature to be passive and only respond to user questions. They thought that prompts could become annoying and were concerned that they would be co-opted for marketing purposes.

Beyond the functionality of *Grindr Bot* (§ 7.3.3.1, p. 199, Figure 7.5) shown, participants had ideas for how to improve it. Some did not want *Grindr Bot* (§ 7.3.3.1, p. 199, Figure 7.5) to appear alongside conversations with other users as they thought it could create clutter. However, this did not necessarily indicate a dislike for the feature. One such participant wanted it to be ever present in the interface for easy access. Participants also suggested ways that *Grindr Bot* (§ 7.3.3.1, p. 199, Figure 7.5) might help them navigate the app. One thought it could help him search for people contextually, for example, by showing him all the profiles he interacted with when in a specific city.

While participants saw *Grindr Bot* (§ 7.3.3.1, p. 199, Figure 7.5) as beneficial, some expressed concerns about how accurate its responses would be. They noted that there can be great geographical variation in how people communicate and that its responses may not be adequately localised. There was also a suggestion that those who might need *Grindr Bot* (§ 7.3.3.1, p. 199, Figure 7.5) the most to understand the use of slang or emoji, might also be those who struggle the most to use it. Finally, one person had concerns about *Grindr Bot* (§ 7.3.3.1, p. 199, Figure 7.5) sharing right-wing content. Some also raised privacy concerns about *Grindr Bot* (§ 7.3.3.1, p. 199, Figure 7.5).

“I don’t trust any of the information that I give to these platforms. Especially if I’m talking to one of their bots. Like private messages I have some sort of expectation of confidentiality. They’re probably skimming my information... But when I’m talking to one of their bots, I know that they’re going to be collecting all that information.”
[Evaluation session 2]

7.4.3.3 Concerns about automatic, algorithmic or AI filtering and classification

A common concern from participants was about trusting automated features to make the right decisions for them. While in favour of *New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics* (§ 7.3.1.1, p. 197, Figure 7.1), they raised concerns over how accurate the automated detection of NSFW content might be. Some participants also noted variations in what people might consider to be NSFW and suggested that if the algorithm was just looking for nudity in images, it might miss content that is confronting in other ways.

For some features, transparency over algorithmic features could help alleviate concerns. For example, participants thought that the automated detection of NSFW pictures in *New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics* (§ 7.3.1.1, p. 197, Figure 7.1) would be acceptable if there was an option to report photos for manual review.

Similarly, there were concerns that the classification of content that *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) relies on may cause issues.

“I feel like there’s a lot of trust in the platform’s ability to categorise this content. Comedy for one is subjective based on who you are, where you are based. Is it satirical? Is it a political jab? Or is it comedy?”

[Evaluation session three]

Some participants suggested that users could be made to classify their own content but acknowledged that this would create extra labour. On the other hand, participants also had concerns about *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) relying on users to accurately classify their own content.

“So maybe I want to limit what [I] don’t want to see, but then... a lot of people use random hashtags. So they’re probably going to be using those. I’m going to watch an editorial or some anime reel, and I’m going to see people tagging that as politics, because they just wanted to have the most views. But then if I do say no politics, then I don’t see it.”

[Evaluation session one]

Some highlighted concerns about *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) creating echo chambers that would reinforce divisions between people. Others worried that if they set up *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) to be too narrow, that it could unintentionally filter content they would have wanted to see. Participants raised similar concerns about filters in *Providing more control over who can find and message you* (§ 7.3.2.1, p. 198, Figure 7.3) being too narrow and about *Block repeated messages* (§ 7.3.1.2, p. 197, Figure 7.2) blocking messages that they would actually want ²².

²² See *Helping people connect more easily with matches but not blocking those who do not fit filters* (§ 7.4.1.4, p. 207) and *Limiting repeated messages could be beneficial* (§ 7.4.1.5, p. 208), respectively.

Participants also noted concerns about the accuracy of *Grindr Bot* (§ 7.3.3.1, see Figure 7.5c, p. 200) nudges. While seen as positive in some cases, participants noted that such an automated system could misidentify what is happening and provide inappropriate feedback.

“the prompt that comes up when you’re about to do something that may not be respectful, that could be annoying and especially as I was just saying like if your sort of kink is to be degraded or something like that, then obviously that’s going to come up a lot.” [Evaluation session three]

7.4.4 Providing ways to connect with local communities

Participants liked *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, p. 202, Figure 7.9) and saw it as a helpful concept for finding connection to local communities whether at home or when travelling. In this overarching theme, we describe two themes relating to it:

- *Helping people find their footing in the community or when travelling* (§ 7.4.4.1, p. 215).
- *Supporting a wide range of interests* (§ 7.4.4.2, p. 216).

7.4.4.1 Helping people find their footing in the community or when travelling

Participants highlighted how *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, p. 202, Figure 7.9) could be helpful when travelling.

“I would definitely use [Local Guide]. I think 10 out of 10. It would be like Google Maps but like queer. There’s no app that has the people. It has the local people right now. And like the information, events, that’s so important because you arrive from any city and you want to go out, hang out, meet new people but you don’t know what the locals use for events.” [Evaluation session one]

Participants also saw the benefit of being able to use *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, p. 202, Figure 7.9) at home. Some thought that it would be particularly useful for those who have had little exposure to the local queer community.

“I think it’s good, especially in a regional sense, some people are quite isolated generally. So being able to see where they can find community, where they can reach out to people, where there’s a safe space and where there’s support.” [Evaluation session three]

Participants had a number of ideas for extending *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, p. 202, Figure 7.9) and *Grindr Bot* (§ 7.3.3.1, p. 199, Figure 7.5) to provide local knowledge. Some thought that it should provide safety information about places that are safe to visit and areas to avoid. Similarly, participants discussed how

Grindr Bot (§ 7.3.3.1, p. 199, Figure 7.5) could allow someone to ask “I’m visiting this area, what’s happening?”. In addition, they thought that it could also provide local knowledge about the “vibes” of different venues.

The map view of *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, see Figure 7.9b, p. 203) for exploring where to go was popular. To improve it, participants suggested a filter to show different kinds of queer establishments. They also suggested features that would provide information about where people were, for example, a heat map showing where users of the app were congregating or indicators of how busy venues were. Participants thought that such features could be useful if travelling and unsure where to go but also at home when deciding where to go. However, some also raised privacy concerns.

“I would be concerned. I feel like that leads to potential hate crimes and stuff. It’s like, okay, there’s a lot of queers in this district, let’s target them. So I feel like that could potentially be a negative use of that, but I see the benefit from, for me, like, I want to see where queers are.”

[Evaluation session three]

Participants also suggested ways that users could play more active roles in *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, p. 202, Figure 7.9). Adding the ability to leave reviews was suggested, as was functionality for allowing people to connect over attendance at events.

“members of the app can actually comment, suggest. Yeah. Because I think it would be more trusted if it’s coming from a queer source like Grindr, like you know, then like anything that is general to the public, like Google” [Evaluation session one]

Participants saw the separation between locals and everyone else in *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, see Figure 7.9c, p. 203) as overly binary and unneeded. However, some participants liked the ability to find those who were open to exploring new places with them. One participant commented on how much they liked the idea of being able to “fellow travellers” while others suggested that people could opt-in to being displayed as “guides” for those visiting.

7.4.4.2 Supporting a wide range of interests

The mockups for *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, p. 202, Figure 7.9) show real information that was found in online listings found when searching for queer venues and events. However, some participants highlighted that the listings shown were very much focused on the dominant scene for queer men, and they wanted it to show a broader range. In the third evaluation session, one participant shared how he has recently joined a local queer sports team and suggested the inclusion of community and sporting organisations into *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, p. 202, Figure 7.9). Similarly, one participant noted that the topics provided in *Suggested topics* (§ 7.3.5.1, p. 202, Figure 7.8) could be expanded, and some talked about wanting it to surface content

related to community groups.

“I feel like a lot of these things are related to the scene. I don’t go to [the main local queer event]. It’s not my thing. And then a lot of the things that come up are either gay clubs or drag queens. Some of my friends, we don’t really... It doesn’t interest us. [Talking about Suggested Topics.] I love history but I also like things other than queer history. So a diversity of options I think would be good.” [Evaluation session one]

7.5 Chapter 7 Conclusion

This third study used a co-design approach to explore how the design of social platforms could be improved to better support the experiences of queer young men. It built on the findings from *Study 2*, using them to ground our co-design work in the experiences of participants from that study. We then mocked-up concepts that emerged in the co-design workshops so that they could be presented and validated as part of evaluation sessions.

Overall we found that participants greatly appreciated features that gave them more agency over their experiences, especially where they support consent. Additionally, participants liked features that would provide them more control over their visibility and connect them to community. While participants had mixed reactions to automated features, they appreciated the use of AI-based features to support understanding and exploration. Our work suggests the need for social platforms to be designed in ways that better support consent, allow for variation in user preferences and situations and use automated features in ways that are mindful of user desires for agency.

In the following chapter, we use the findings from this and previous studies to address the second research question, discussing design recommendations and challenges that emerged from this work.

Chapter 8

RQ 2 Discussion: How might social platforms be designed to be more supportive of the experiences of queer young men?

8.1 Introduction

The first two studies focused on answering the first research question by investigating current experiences on social platforms. In the third study, we moved to answering the second research question – employing a research through design approach to understand how to improve social platform experiences. In this chapter, we present our findings in response to the second research question in the form of a series of design recommendations and challenges. The recommendations provide prescriptive guidance for designing social platforms, for example, to build consent into the design of audience curation affordances. Meanwhile, the challenges reflect on tensions and issues identified as part of this work for which we do not have design solutions to offer. However, in describing these challenges, we add to conversations about how social platforms ought to be designed, and provide directions for future work to explore. Many of these recommendations and challenges draw on the design concepts, and participant responses to them, from *Study 3*, although we also include findings from the first two studies where relevant. Following the recommendations and challenges, we also discuss common design considerations and structural barriers to implementing them.

8.2 Design recommendations

In this section, we describe our recommendations for improving the design of social platforms. We start in section 8.2.1 by discussing how to design in ways that give people more agency over their experiences on social platforms, particularly in relation to algorithmic suggestion of content and self-presentation. We then discuss in section 8.2.2, how to give people more agency over their experiences on dating apps and designing to improve consent. Finally, in section 8.2.3 we discuss designing social platforms in ways that support building connections to community.

8.2.1 Give people more agency over their experiences on social platforms

In this section we detail three design recommendations that relate to giving people more agency over the content they see and share on social platforms:

- *Design to give people agency over the content they see* (§ 8.2.1.1, p. 219).
- *Design to allow flexibility in curating audiences* (§ 8.2.1.3, p. 222).
- *Design to support retroactive curation* (§ 8.2.1.4, p. 223).

8.2.1.1 Design to give people agency over the content they see

The content that people see on social platforms can have both positive and negative impacts on their experiences and sense of self. For example, as we found in *Study 2*, the content participants saw on social platforms could help them learn about being LGBTQ+ and feel more comfortable in their identities, but it could also expose them to “toxic” ideals of what it means to be a queer man and lead to negative self-comparison¹. A number of *Study 2* participants described strategies they employed to overcome self-comparison, and this often involved avoiding content they found triggering². Building on this insight, participants in the *Study 3* co-design workshops proposed designing to give people a “mental health algorithm”, leading to the creation of the concept *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7).

Social platforms that display feeds of content algorithmically should give people agency over the content that is presented to them³. As part of *Study 3*, the concept *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) emerged as a possible way to do this. Participant responses in the evaluation sessions indicated they liked the ability to customise the content that algorithms served to them in feed-based apps like Instagram, as shown in *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7). Similarly, in *Study 2*, we found that many participants desired greater control over the content presented to them, for example, lamenting that they are

¹ See *Learning about and accepting one’s identity* (§ 5.3.1.1, p. 76) and *Wrestling with the pressure to conform to the image of an ideal queer man* (§ 5.3.3, p. 94), respectively

² See *Avoiding content that could be triggering* (§ 5.3.5.3.2, p. 142).

³ As we discuss in *Design to help people explore online content while protecting privacy* (§ 8.2.3.1, p. 234), they should do so in ways that protect privacy.

often not shown all of the posts their friends have made, or expressing a desire to break out of “filter bubbles” they saw feed algorithms creating⁴. This echoes findings from DeVito et al. (2021b) and Simpson and Semaan (2021) who found that their participants desired greater ability to self-determine the ways that content was presented to them on the social platforms they used. This also aligns with work by Im et al. (2021), who apply the lens of affirmative consent to the design of social platforms. While others have proposed designs for LGBTQ+ people in this realm, it has been more focused on moderation. For example, DeVito et al.’s (2021b) work focused on values and suggested designs that would better align algorithms on social platforms with those of their LGBTQ+ participants. However, the focus on values and preventing harm, while important, meant that their design suggestions were often more about avoiding harm than creating desirable experiences, and did not consider how situational factors could impact this.

Importantly, participant responses to mockups in *Study 3* indicated the situational nature of the kinds of interactions they wanted to have on social platforms. For example, they did not want explicit content to appear when looking at social platforms on the bus, even if in a different context they were happy to see them⁵. A strength of *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) was that the concept not only offered a way for participants to determine what content was shown to them, but also that it was easy to adjust this and retain their preferences for future use⁶. This also aligns with the suggestion from Im et al. (2021) that people should be regularly asked what they want to see on a specific platform – just because they have consented to something in the past does not mean that they will want that forever.

Beyond academic research, there is a push in some areas against algorithmic feeds due to the concerns about addictiveness or other negative outcomes. For example, under the European Union’s Digital Services Act, platforms that meet inclusion criteria must provide a way to turn off algorithms that determine what content people see (Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, 2024). In response, TikTok, Facebook and Instagram have provided users the option to use a chronological feed of posts from those who they are following (Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, 2024). However, this binary distinction between an algorithmic and a chronological feed may be limiting.

Since conducting *Study 3*, Bluesky, a new social platform similar to Twitter has shown how giving people agency over the content they are recommended could work (The Bluesky Team, 2023). Similar to the way the concept *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) allows people to switch between different preferences over the content that is shown to them, Bluesky allows people to browse posts on the platform through configurable feeds. However, while our concept

⁴ See *Concerns around algorithmic presentation of content* (§ 5.3.1.3.2, p. 87).

⁵ We further discuss designing to give people more consent over seeing NSFW content in *Design to support consent over NSFW content* (§ 8.2.2.3, p. 229).

⁶ See *Providing control over algorithmic content feeds* (§ 7.4.3.1, p. 211).

allowed people to easily create their own “focus modes”, creating new feeds currently requires “a bit of developer familiarity” (The Bluesky Team, 2023). While Bluesky has already received some attention in HCI (Balduf et al., 2024; Kleppmann et al., 2024), so far the primary focus has been the technical implementation of the site and its underlying protocol, not empirical research about the experience of using the platform. However, based on our findings from *Study 3*, we expect that the agency Bluesky provides people over the way content is shown to them is likely an improvement over the binary choice between an algorithmic feed and a chronological one.

8.2.1.2 Design to give people transparency over the algorithms that present content to them

Although *Study 3* participants appreciated the use of features that relied on AI in some contexts, there were concerns about features that relied on them to make decisions for users or to classify content. As Yildirim et al. (2023) found in their research, it is common for designers to envision new concepts that require near-perfect model performance and that would be difficult to build. While conducting a technical review of the concepts resulting from the *Study 3* co-design workshops was beyond the scope of this thesis, some participants in the evaluation sessions expressed similar concerns. For example, some worried that the concepts which relied on automated classification of content, such as *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7), would not be accurate enough for them to want to use them. Similarly, DeVito et al.’s (2021b) participants described concerns over the ability of automated systems to understand context when classifying content.

In some cases, participants in the evaluation sessions thought their concerns could be mitigated by allowing oversight, for example, being able to flag content for manual review. Similarly, some suggested ways that platforms could provide increased transparency over the way algorithms function to present content to them, for example, by adapting the map layout from the concept *Suggested topics* (§ 7.3.5.1, see Figure 7.8b, p. 203) as a way to visualise decisions algorithms had made about their interests. As prior work in HCI has found, people often form folk-theories of how platforms work and the reasons that content is shown to them (DeVito et al., 2018a; Mayworm et al., 2024). Similarly, our participants in *Study 2* described theories of how algorithms presented them content, or showed what they had posted to others⁷. Transparency into algorithmic recommendations was something desired by a number of *Study 2* participants as well. For example, some expressed interest in being able to see the topics that platforms had determined they were interested in. In addition, some were concerned about being part of “filter bubbles”, and increased transparency over the content they are being presented could help confirm whether this is the case or not. Transparency features might also be designed to work with affordances to control algorithmic presentation of content, such as those we recommend above⁸.

⁷ See *Concerns around algorithmic presentation of content* (§ 5.3.1.3.2, p. 87).

⁸ See *Design to give people agency over the content they see* (§ 8.2.1.1, p. 219).

8.2.1.3 Design to allow flexibility in curating audiences

As we found in *Part II*, the ability for participants to curate the audiences of their presentations on social platforms was vital⁹. Not only did the ability to curate audiences across platforms and accounts give participants the ability to conceal being queer or trans to avoid negative experiences, it also provided a way to share less idealised presentations with trusted audiences. However, as we also found, participants faced barriers to curating audiences. For example, many created alt accounts to separate their audiences, but described how these were often found by those whom they did not want to know about them. In addition, many participants described that they found it burdensome to use alt accounts or audience curation affordances, as it is labour intensive to maintain multiple accounts and keep audience lists up to date. Furthermore, while some platforms (e.g., Facebook), afford complex privacy settings on a post-specific level, many of the platforms participants used (e.g., Instagram and Twitter) only afford binary privacy options which are inadequate.

Given the importance of allowing people to curate audiences on social platforms to maintain strategic outness (Orne, 2011), we echo calls from Carrasco and Kerne (2018) for platforms to provide more selective visibility over content that is shared. In addition, as we argued earlier¹⁰, the ability to curate audiences was important for our participants beyond just concealing their identities, and this should be considered as part of designing such affordances. Based on our findings, we now discuss design recommendations.

Social platforms that support posting content publicly ought to afford the ability to curate audiences of individual posts. This could be through post-specific privacy settings, such as what Facebook has, or through restricted stories such as the Close Friends story on Instagram. Their design ought to afford the ability to curate multiple audiences, and not create a binary distinction. For example, while Instagram lets one create a Close Friends list that stories can be restricted to, there is only one audience list, and as *Study 2* participants described, this could be problematic¹¹. As part of *Study 3*, the concept *Smart social circles* (§ 7.3.4.1, p. 201, Figure 7.6) demonstrated how Instagram's Close Friends feature could be extended by offering multiple audience lists, and was well received by participants¹².

In addition to letting one select people to include as part of a curated audience, such features should afford one the ability to exclude specific people. As participants across all three studies highlighted, curating audiences was often to hide content they shared from specific people. For example, concealing being LGBTQ+ from family was something participants in each study described doing, or wanting to be able to do¹³.

⁹ See *Curating disclosure and beyond* (§ 6.3, p. 174) where we discuss our findings related to curating audiences.

¹⁰ See *Curating beyond disclosure of identity* (§ 6.3.3, p. 176).

¹¹ See *Encountering barriers to curation* (§ 6.3.4, p. 176) where we describe this.

¹² See *Providing ways to elude visibility* (§ 7.4.2.2, p. 210).

¹³ See *Curating to achieve strategic outness and avoid negative experiences* (§ 6.3.1, p. 174) and

Audience curation affordances should be designed in ways that are not burdensome to use. Similar to prior work (Marwick & boyd, 2014), we found that our participants often described audience curation features as too labour intensive to use, with some opting to not use them as a result. For example, some described how they stopped using Instagram’s Close Friends feature due to the effort required to “perform maintenance” on it. As part of *Study 3*, the concept for *Smart social circles* (§ 7.3.4.1, p. 201, Figure 7.6) demonstrated how algorithmic suggestions could make such audience maintenance less burdensome. When posting, there is a “suggested story” (see Figure 7.6a, p. 201), and when updating the list, there are suggestions of people to add (see Figure 7.6b, p. 201). Although such automated features could reduce the labour associated with managing audiences, care should be taken to limit possibilities for unintentional context collapse (Duguay, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Similar to other recommendations¹⁴, we advocate for designing such features in ways that provide agency and transparency to people using them, while also protecting privacy.

Audience curation features should also extend beyond people’s posts to how their accounts and traces of their interactions are shown to others. For example, many *Study 2* participants described how features that suggest who to follow or add as friends often made their accounts discoverable to those they were trying to keep them hidden from¹⁵. In addition, some described how on platforms such as Facebook, interacting with content or RSVPing to an event could be broadcast, and how this restricted how they used the platform¹⁶. Following Carrasco and Kerne (2018) who also argue against the default publicness (Cho, 2018) of profiles, posts and interactions, people should have agency over their visibility on social platforms. For example, people ought to be able to hide their accounts, posts and interactions from others. Given that many people struggle to understand privacy settings or their actual audiences on social platforms, and this can often lead to context collapse (Carrasco & Kerne, 2018; Cho, 2018; Marwick & boyd, 2014), we echo Carrasco and Kerne’s (2018) recommendation that platforms obscure by default. For example, by making people opt in to their profiles being recommended to others.

As we discuss in a subsequent recommendation, audience curation affordances should also be designed in ways that support consent¹⁷. In the following recommendation, we explore how the design of curation affordances ought to consider past content as well.

8.2.1.4 Design to support retroactive curation

As we discuss above, social platforms ought to offer affordances that give people flexibility when curating audiences for the content they post. In addition, they

Allowing for greater selective visibility (§ 7.4.2.1, p. 209).

¹⁴ See *Design to give people agency over the content they see* (§ 8.2.1.1, p. 219), *Design to give people transparency over the algorithms that present content to them* (§ 8.2.1.2, p. 221), and *Design to help people explore online content while protecting privacy* (§ 8.2.3.1, p. 234).

¹⁵ See *Barriers to curating spaces with trusted audiences* (§ 5.3.5.1.3, p. 136).

¹⁶ See *Concealing identity from people they know in the physical realm* (§ 5.3.2.1.1, p. 89).

¹⁷ See *Design to build consent into audience curation features* (§ 8.2.2.5, p. 232).

ought to support retroactive curation. As we found in both *Study 1* and *Study 2*, many participants retroactively curated their social platform posts and audiences for a variety of reasons. Prior work has often described the burden of retroactively curating content and audiences on social platforms (Carrasco & Kerne, 2018; Haimson et al., 2015), and similar to their findings, some of our participants described how it was easier to delete and recreate accounts than to retroactively curate them. However, creating new accounts may bring with it other challenges, for example, unintentionally losing parts of one’s audience who are supportive but for whatever reason do not make the transition (Haimson et al., 2016). While many of our participants described their practices of retroactive curation, it was particularly important for those who were trans. As Haimson et al. (2015, p. 1177) describes, “gender transition is one of the only life changes so drastic that a person often becomes literally unrecognizable...” highlighting that trans people will often change their “name, gender and physical appearance” and how this “requires many complicated decisions around disclosure”. Audience curation could often be about removing unsupportive audiences before posting about transitioning, as it was for P11 in *Study 2*¹⁸. However, it could also be related to removing past posts that were no longer representative of who participants were, whether due to transition or otherwise¹⁹.

To reduce the burden of retroactive curation, social platforms ought to be designed in ways that make it easy to curate past presentations at scale. Although no *Study 3* concepts explored how to implement such affordances, prior work has offered design recommendations. For example, Im et al. (2021, p. 11) created a concept for a “revertible profile page” that would afford the ability to query one’s past activity and provide options to curate it. In the context of relationship break ups, Herron (2020, p. 115) prototyped “grammars of action” that explored how platforms could be designed to curate and adapt what he referred to as “digital possessions”. As highlighted by Herron (2020), curation practices during life transitions are not necessarily about removing or deleting content, but, for example, sometimes about adapting or preserving it. Therefore, retroactive curation affordances should be designed in ways that give people agency over what they want to do with content beyond just removing it.

The desire to retroactively curate one’s social platform profiles could also be based in the desire to limit what new audiences see, not necessarily to remove past posts. For example, in *Study 1* P9 described that he had very publicly transitioned gender during high school and was happy to retain pre-transition posts on his profiles, until he started to meet new people who did not realise he was trans. This created a tension for him between deleting pre-transition content, something he did not want to do, or being forced to disclose being trans²⁰. This highlights how retroactive curation affordances ought to allow people to limit or change the audiences of their

¹⁸ See *Concealing identity from people they know in the physical realm* (§ 5.3.2.1.1, p. 89).

¹⁹ For examples, see *Concealing identity from people they know in the physical realm* (§ 5.3.2.1.1, p. 89).

²⁰ See *Technology and encounters with heteronormativity* (§ 4.3.4, p. 57).

past posts. In addition, platforms might be designed to limit the visibility of past posts beyond a certain time window by default. For example, Retro, a new social platform app designed around photo sharing, only lets people see posts that are more than 4 weeks old if they have been given a special key (Goode, 2023). In this way, trusted audiences can be given access to one’s full profile while new connections only see the most recent updates.

Retroactive curation features should also offer a way for content to be hidden from others while being retained on the platform for one’s own viewing. As many of our participants in *Study 2* described, social platform profiles are often used as part of personal remembering. For example, some described how they posted moments they wanted to look back on, or used their profiles to remind them of good moments ²¹. As P9 in *Study 1* described, he worried about losing the past version of himself, even if he felt he needed to hide it from others. Allowing people to hide posts from others without deleting them permanently is a way to support such remembering while also balancing the need for retroactive curation during life transitions.

As we discuss in the next section, dating apps were another area where design could be improved to give people more agency over their experiences.

8.2.2 Help people to navigate mismatched expectations and improve consent over NSFW content

A key issue for participants in *Study 1* and *Study 2* was the way that mismatched expectations between them and those they interacted with on social platforms could create negative experiences ²². Similar to findings of others researching experiences on dating apps, our participants expectations of the kinds of interactions they would have were often not met, and there were significant issues when it came to consent (Dietzel, 2024; Wongsomboon et al., 2023; Zytka et al., 2021). For example, many lamented receiving highly sexualised messages or unsolicited NSFW pictures on dating apps such as Grindr. However, while such issues have been identified before, there has been limited work that has explored design solutions to address them. Furthermore, our findings in *Study 2* highlighted issues of consent around audience curation features ²³. In this section, we detail the following design recommendations to combat such mismatched expectations and improve consent:

- *Design to support variation in the kinds of connections people are looking to make* (§ 8.2.2.1, p. 226).
- *Design to give people agency over who can message them without forcing matching* (§ 8.2.2.2, p. 228).
- *Design to support consent over NSFW content* (§ 8.2.2.3, p. 229).

²¹ See *Curating idealised content for oneself* (§ 5.3.4.1.3, p. 111).

²² See *Seeking queer spaces* (§ 4.3.6, p. 60) and *Navigating mismatched expectations on dating apps and issues around consent* (§ 5.3.6.4, p. 158), respectively.

²³ See *The need to consider consent around posting of NSFW content* (§ 6.6.1, p. 185).

- *Design automated safety features in ways that give people control over how they are applied* (§ 8.2.2.4, p. 231).
- *Design to build consent into audience curation features* (§ 8.2.2.5, p. 232).

8.2.2.1 Design to support variation in the kinds of connections people are looking to make

While many of our *Study 2* participants described seeing dating apps as on a spectrum between those supporting more casual and hookup based interactions and those more focused on longer term or platonic connections²⁴, it was clear that this did not strictly correlate to their usage of each app. For example, a number of participants described how Grindr was not the place to find friends, but also described how they had made them on the platform. Moreover, while this way of looking at the three main apps participants talked about (Grindr, Tinder and Hinge) was common, there was variation between participants in how they perceived and used each app. Additionally, while participants built such perceptions through use of the apps, many described how their initial expectations when joining dating apps such as Grindr did not account for the way that people behaved towards them²⁵. Finally, what participants were looking for could also vary by who they were interacting with as well.

Together, these factors mean that the design of dating apps should consider how to support a wide variation in the expectations people will have when using them. In doing so, their design should help people communicate their expectations, and make these clear to those they are interacting with. Given that prior work on dating apps has found that those who are seeking more than hookups are often at a disadvantage and have more negative experiences (Wongsomboon et al., 2023; Zytko et al., 2021), such features are particularly important to those looking for other kinds of connections. It is not surprising, therefore, that the *Study 3* participants who were not interested in hookups were those most in favour of the designs we discuss below.

As part of *Study 3*, the mockup for *Signalling what you are looking for* (§ 7.3.2.2, p. 199, Figure 7.4) explored what this might look like, and received positive feedback from participants in the evaluation sessions²⁶. Importantly, it was designed to signal what one is looking for with specific people, and this could be updated at any time. While this concept offered the option to signal preferences at the beginning of an interaction (see Figure 7.4a, p. 200), participants preferred the idea of signalling their intentions once they had started to get to know someone more, and could therefore make a more informed decision. However, similar to findings by Zytko and Furlo (2023), they expressed concerns around the timing of when this would happen, and how it would be perceived, highlighting an area for future design work.

²⁴ See *Using a spectrum of dating apps* (§ 5.3.6.2, p. 151) where we discuss how participants described the purposes of the dating apps they used.

²⁵ See *Grindr as a place for hookups* (§ 5.3.6.2.1, p. 152) and *Navigating mismatched expectations on dating apps and issues around consent* (§ 5.3.6.4, p. 158).

²⁶ See *Supporting people to communicate what they are looking for and expectations in dynamic ways* (§ 7.4.1.2, p. 205) where we discuss participants' responses to the mockup.

Participant responses to *Signalling what you are looking for* (§ 7.3.2.2, p. 199, Figure 7.4) also suggest that dating apps should provide a way to dynamically signal what one is looking for in the moment. For example, some participants wanted to be able to communicate in their dating app profiles what they were looking for in the moment separately to what they are generally ²⁷. Currently, many social platforms are designed in ways that only afford static profiles or user preferences, but participant responses to these concepts in the evaluation sessions suggest that this is not adequate. This could be achieved by, for example, offering an affordance for people to customise what they are looking for when they launch the app. Beyond just indicating what one is looking for in the moment, dating apps could also be designed to offer the ability to further customise one's profile based on this. As a number of *Study 2* participants described, they customised their profiles based on what they were looking for in the moment ²⁸, for example, showing face pictures only when they were looking for friends.

What someone is looking for should be prominently displayed to those who interact with them so that it is harder to ignore. As many *Study 2* participants highlighted, people often do not read their dating app profiles, and this can lead to mismatched expectations ²⁹. To counteract this, *Signalling what you are looking for* (§ 7.3.2.2, p. 199, Figure 7.4) was designed to indicate what someone is looking for inside the chat, and *Study 3* participants appreciated that it would make it more difficult for someone to miss or forget. However, this still relies on someone to act in good faith and respect one's indicated preferences, a more structural issue that is difficult to address through design alone. As we describe below, such features should also signal consent around NSFW content, and this may be easier to enforce ³⁰.

Unfortunately, a limitation of relying on people to indicate what they are looking for is that it may be unreliable. For example, *Study 2* participants highlighted that what someone says they are looking for can often be different to how they behave ³¹. For example, some described that even if someone said they were looking for friends, they might still seek more sexual interactions. Encouraging people to more regularly signal what they are looking for, instead of just when they create their profile, and allowing people to change this for specific people, may help alleviate this issue. As some *Study 3* participants described, they might use *Signalling what you are looking for* (§ 7.3.2.2, p. 199, Figure 7.4) to indicate by default that they were looking for more platonic connections, but adjust this to show they were open to more with those they were interested in ³². Even though this would change what someone is looking for compared to their original profile, it would likely be beneficial as it could provide a more accurate signal for subsequent interactions. Similarly, the ability to adapt one's profile as part of setting what one is looking for may alleviate some of

²⁷ See *Supporting people to communicate what they are looking for and expectations in dynamic ways* (§ 7.4.1.2, p. 205).

²⁸ See *Optimising dating app profiles* (§ 5.3.4.3.1, p. 124).

²⁹ See *Finding dating apps uncomfortably sexualised or overwhelming* (§ 5.3.6.4.1, p. 159) where this is discussed.

³⁰ See *Design to support consent over NSFW content* (§ 8.2.2.3, p. 229).

³¹ See *Finding dating apps uncomfortably sexualised or overwhelming* (§ 5.3.6.4.1, p. 159).

³² See *Providing ways to elude visibility* (§ 7.4.2.2, p. 210).

the privacy concerns some *Study 2* participants had about saying they were looking for hookups while displaying a face picture on their profiles. Such issues should be reflected in the design of signalling features, and they should consider how to incentivise people to accurately reflect what they are looking for, both at any given time and with specific people they are interacting with.

8.2.2.2 Design to give people agency over who can message them without forcing matching

Given that issues of consent and sexual violence are prevalent on dating apps (Dietzel, 2024; Zytka et al., 2021), features that afford users more control over who can interact with them are important for safety reasons. Many dating apps are designed so that people “match” before they are able to interact with each other. For example, the basic mechanic of Tinder is that people swipe left or right on someone’s profile, and if two people both swipe to indicate they like the others profile, they can then message. As some of our *Study 2* participants described³³, they thought matching processes improved the interactions they had – after all, if they matched with someone, there had to be a baseline level of interest in the other person. Furthermore, as some participants described, a matching process forces people to put effort into their profiles for someone to want to match with them. However, as they also highlighted, many of their matches did not lead to sustained interactions. In contrast, some platforms (e.g., Grindr) do not have a matching process, and anyone can message anyone else that is shown to them. Although some participants saw this as increasing the risk of negative experiences, others commented how this results in a more dynamic or spontaneous messaging experience that is not predicated on a single matching event. For example, while on Tinder there is a distinct moment where people match and can start a conversation, on Grindr, someone appearing nearby on the grid can create a spontaneous opportunity to message. Together, these perspectives show the tension between designs that are designed to match people, ensuring mutual interest, and those which offer more spontaneous ways to connect.

As part of *Study 3*, *Providing more control over who can find and message you* (§ 7.3.2.1, p. 198, Figure 7.3) explored how the design of dating apps such as Grindr could be improved to better navigate this tension. It provided a new filtering option to limit one’s visibility on the app to only those that match one’s filters (see Figure 7.3b, p. 199), similar to how many matching-based apps, such as Tinder, work. In addition, messages from those with whom one has not previously interacted would appear in a new “requests” tab (see Figure 7.3c, p. 199). Participant responses to the mockup in the evaluation sessions suggested that for some, having such control over who could message them would be likely to greatly improve their experiences on the app³⁴. However, some preferred the current

³³ See *Matching processes can improve interactions but reduce engagement* (§ 5.3.6.3, p. 155) where we discuss three themes related to matching processes.

³⁴ See *Helping people connect more easily with matches but not blocking those who do not fit filters* (§ 7.4.1.4, p. 207) where we discuss participant responses to this concept.

system where anyone can message them, or had concerns about missing messages that were directed to the “requests” tab.

Addressing this tension, social platforms aiming to foster new connections between people ought to be designed in ways that allow people to control who can interact with them. If a matching process is involved, designs should consider how elements of spontaneity might be encouraged. For example, providing moments to start or rekindle conversations beyond the initial match event. As Ether Perel, a psychotherapist who talks widely about relationships, suggests, “to remain useful, the best [dating] apps will elicit playfulness, spontaneity and curiosity” (Cherelus, 2025). Especially when designing for LGBTQ+ people, or those with other stigmatised identities, designs should consider how to support people having agency over who can message them without doing so in a way that restricts others ability to be anonymous.

The strength of the design in *Providing more control over who can find and message you* (§ 7.3.2.1, p. 198, Figure 7.3) in meeting the recommendations above is that it gives agency to those who want extra control over who can message them, without forcing a matching process. In this way, it does not centre interactions around a matching event, which can reduce spontaneity, and it does not punish those who prefer to not have identifiable photos on their profiles. In addition, it allows those who are comfortable with messages from those not matching their filters the ability to keep their profiles open.

8.2.2.3 Design to support consent over NSFW content

As we discuss in *Chapter II: Investigating current social platform experiences*³⁵, many *Study 2* participants disliked how common it was for them to receive NSFW content without their consent. Often this was discussed in regards to dating apps such as Grindr, however, participants also noted that audience targeting affordances on other social platforms, such as Instagram could be used to share unwanted NSFW content. In contrast, some participants in *Study 2* and *Study 3* did not mind receiving NSFW content, echoing findings from others that some may see it as part of facilitating sexual encounters with those whom they interact with, especially on dating apps (Dietzel, 2024; Zytka et al., 2021). Given the mismatch in expectations around consent between people, and the potential for harm from non-consensual sharing of NSFW content, it is important to design social platforms in ways that support consent.

Some platforms, such as Grindr, recognise variation in whether users would like to receive NSFW content – they offer three profile options for communicating whether one accepts it, “yes please”, “not at first” and “never”. However, although this allows users to explicitly consent or not, it relies on someone being proactive enough to check before deciding whether to send NSFW content. As *Study 2* participants highlighted, this is not enough to stop them from receiving such content³⁶.

³⁵ See *The need to consider consent around posting of NSFW content* (§ 6.6.1, p. 185).

³⁶ See *Receiving unsolicited NSFW content and being pressured to sext* (§ 5.3.6.4.2, p. 160) where

Moreover, the “Accepts NSFW pics” profile field is static, and cannot be changed for individual people.

Other platforms, for example Instagram, already blur pictures sent by those one is not following by default – that way users can decide if they want to reveal what may be a problematic image from an unknown other. However, this does not apply to media sent by everyone nor, as we described above, to content posted on the platform and not sent in direct messages. Alternatively, some platforms, such as Tinder, do not allow pictures or videos to be sent at all. This alleviates the problem of NSFW content being shared non-consensually on the platform, however, it does not stop people from moving the conversation to different platforms where they can do so, or apply pressure to send such content back, as some *Study 2* participants described³⁷. In addition, using social platforms in NSFW ways is not inherently an issue that should be prevented – doing so without the consent of those involved is the problem. As we argue above³⁸, banning NSFW content on social platforms is not the solution. We now turn to describing our recommended approaches to this issue.

On platforms where people can send media to others, there should be a way to signal consent to receiving NSFW content. In addition, platforms should be designed in ways that do not rely on people to be proactive in checking for consent as the main mechanism for preventing non-consensual sharing of such content. At a minimum, where NSFW content can be sent or viewed without explicit consent, it should be blurred by default, especially as part of initial messages. People should also have the option to temporarily or indefinitely conceal or blur all NSFW content. Following recommendations from Im et al. (2021), consent mechanisms should be voluntary, specific, revertible and unburdensome.

As part of *Study 3* we explored design solutions to improve consent over NSFW content in these ways. *New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics* (§ 7.3.1.1, p. 197, Figure 7.1) extends the current “Accepts NSFW pics” profile field on Grindr to add options for the platform to block or blur NSFW content from being sent to people. Both it and *Grindr Bot* (§ 7.3.3.1, see Figure 7.5c, p. 200) also demonstrate ways that platforms can communicate consent where it is most relevant – when someone goes to share media content. *Signalling what you are looking for* (§ 7.3.2.2, see Figure 7.4b, p. 200) shows how consent over NSFW might be adjusted when interacting with someone, providing an unburdensome way for it to be specific and revertible. The ability of such concepts to reduce the potential for receiving non-consensual NSFW content and to clearly signal what they were looking for with specific people were among the most favoured concepts among participants in the evaluation sessions, even if some were always happy to receive such content personally³⁹.

this is discussed.

³⁷ See *Receiving unsolicited NSFW content and being pressured to sext* (§ 5.3.6.4.2, p. 160).

³⁸ See *The need to consider consent around posting of NSFW content* (§ 6.6.1, p. 185).

³⁹ See *Providing more opportunities for consent and clarifying expectations* (§ 7.4.1, p. 204) where we describe this.

Participants also appreciated designs that were able to give them more agency over seeing NSFW content in situations where they did not want to see it. For example, participants thought that the ability to hide NSFW content situationally as part of *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, see Figure 7.7c, p. 202) would be useful when using their phones in public. Such options to hide NSFW content ought to apply to content one has shared as well – if they are concerned about other people seeing NSFW images on their phone, it does not necessarily matter who they are from. Similarly, people may not want to see the content they have shared with others in their conversation threads, as P23 in *Study 2* described ⁴⁰.

8.2.2.4 Design automated safety features in ways that give people control over how they are applied

Some participants also expressed concerns about automated safety features in concepts such as *New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics* (§ 7.3.1.1, p. 197, Figure 7.1) and *Block repeated messages* (§ 7.3.1.2, p. 197, Figure 7.2), worrying that such features may not be accurate ⁴¹. However, other participants expressed a strong desire for such features, highlighting the potential positive impact it could have on their experiences using dating apps. Instead of blocking messages outright, participants suggested *Grindr Bot* (§ 7.3.3.1, p. 199, Figure 7.5) could be extended to prompt people to reconsider messaging again, similar to how the mockup showed a prompt about NSFW content (see Figure 7.5c, p. 200). This would help in the case where content has been misclassified. However, as Stardust et al. (2023) problematise when describing a similar feature on Tinder, the ability to override such features, while useful in cases of error, relies on people acting in good faith. Similar to our recommendations around blocking NSFW content ⁴², we suggest that people are given the agency to indicate their preferences, and how they ought to be enforced. For example, giving people the option to block people from sending messages that may be considered inappropriate, to just nudge people similar to *Grindr Bot* (§ 7.3.3.1, see Figure 7.5c, p. 200) but not restrict their actions, or to not intervene at all. As the range of responses from participants in the *Study 3* evaluation sessions showed, while all were in favour of improving consent on dating apps, many did not want to use such features themselves ⁴³. Similarly, even if such a system correctly identifies something as disrespectful, that does not necessarily mean it is unwelcome – as one participant highlighted, some people might enjoy receiving overtly sexual or degrading messages ⁴⁴. Designing to nudge people to not send messages that may be inappropriate or confronting by default, while allowing people to either enforce, or disable, blocking messages according to their preferences for anyone that contacts them, might strike a compromise between safety and imperfect algorithmic detection, while not forcing spaces to be sanitised for those who do not want that.

⁴⁰ See *Assessing compatibility and getting to know people better* (§ 5.3.6.5.2, p. 164).

⁴¹ See *Concerns about automatic, algorithmic or AI filtering and classification* (§ 7.4.3.3, p. 214) and *Limiting repeated messages could be beneficial* (§ 7.4.1.5, p. 208), respectively.

⁴² See *Design to support consent over NSFW content* (§ 8.2.2.3, p. 229).

⁴³ See *Providing more agency over receiving or viewing NSFW pictures* (§ 7.4.1.1, p. 204).

⁴⁴ See *Concerns about automatic, algorithmic or AI filtering and classification* (§ 7.4.3.3, p. 214).

8.2.2.5 Design to build consent into audience curation features

Audience curation features are another area where consent should be built-in. As we describe in *Part II*, features used to curate audiences are often designed from the perspective of the person sharing content, and do not consider whether the viewer consents to being part of a restricted audience⁴⁵. This is particularly problematic when NSFW is posted to restricted audiences without the consent of those included, as a number of *Study 2* participants highlighted⁴⁶. In addition, such features are often designed without a way to opt out of being part of a curated audience. As we found in *Study 2*, a number of participants described being surprised to be added to peoples' Instagram Close Friends lists, and not wanting to be there but being unable to remove themselves⁴⁷. Following Im et al. (2021), such designs violate a number of consent principles. For example, being added to a curated audience is not voluntary or revertible – one does not agree to joining, nor is there a way to leave. In addition, it is not specific – if someone follows an account based on what is shown publicly, this does not imply consent to see potentially sensitive, distressing, or NSFW content shared to them as part of a curated audience.

Aiming to address issues of consent related to audience curation features, *Smart social circles* (§ 7.3.4.1, see Figure 7.6c, p. 201) demonstrated a way for people to opt out of being part of the audience. Participants in the evaluation sessions viewed this positively, and it could also be beneficial in situations where people are unwillingly part of curated audiences even if they are not being used to share NSFW content. However, some *Study 3* participants highlighted that such a feature was not enough given that it is opt out and not opt in⁴⁸. Therefore, we suggest that in addition to providing an affordance to opt out of being part of a targeted audience, that people are given the option to consent to be added, or that as recommended above⁴⁹, NSFW content is blurred by default until one consents to seeing it. An alternative is to allow one to advertise a curated audience so that people can opt in, something currently possible with Snapchat's private story feature, which some *Study 2* participants described using⁵⁰. *Study 3* participants appreciated that restricted stories in *Smart social circles* (§ 7.3.4.1, p. 201, Figure 7.6) were named, similar to Snapchat's private stories, so that when one is given the option to opt into joining, they may have some context around what it will be used for⁵¹. However, as was highlighted, this does rely on people to descriptively name curated audience lists based on what they will be used, and to not post content that deviates from this. As a result, even if someone opts into a curated audience list, they should still have to consent to seeing NSFW content before seeing it. Whether able to be named or not, content posted to curated audiences ought to be highlighted as such so that the viewer can tell that it has been targeted at them. As we found in *Study 2*, knowing one is part of a restricted audience, such as

⁴⁵ See *The need to consider consent around posting of NSFW content* (§ 6.6.1, p. 185).

⁴⁶ See *Navigating consent when sharing NSFW content* (§ 5.3.4.2.5, p. 123).

⁴⁷ See *Curating spaces to interact with trusted audiences* (§ 5.3.5.1.1, p. 131) where this is discussed.

⁴⁸ See *Building consent into features that target audiences* (§ 7.4.1.3, p. 207).

⁴⁹ See *Design to support consent over NSFW content* (§ 8.2.2.3, p. 229).

⁵⁰ See *Using main accounts to post thirst traps and NSFW content* (§ 5.3.4.2.2, p. 116).

⁵¹ See *Building consent into features that target audiences* (§ 7.4.1.3, p. 207).

Instagram’s Close Friends can carry meaning beyond the content that is posted there – in some cases a positive reflection of their relationship with the poster, in others an uncomfortable overstep⁵². It may also help viewers realise that something has not been shared with everyone and encourage them to treat it accordingly, even if this ought not to be relied on as a privacy guarantee. Following Im et al. (2021), designs that follow these recommendations will allow content shared to restricted audiences to be seen in ways that are voluntary (one will have to consent), informed (one will know they are part of a curated audience), specific (for example, one consents to seeing Close Friends stories on top of those that are public) and revertible (one can opt out by removing themselves at any time).

In addition to improving consent, allowing people to opt in or out of restricted audiences may also reduce the curatorial burden of managing them by allowing people to self-select. Although audience curation features are often conceptualised as primarily to conceal content from specific others, they can also be used to segment audiences for non-privacy related reasons. For example, some *Study 2* participants described using restricted stories to avoid “spamming” their followers with content they did not think everyone would want to see⁵³. Similarly, in *Study 3* some participants expressed the desire for *Smart social circles* (§ 7.3.4.1, p. 201, Figure 7.6) to provide ways that people could opt in to a restricted story for similar reasons⁵⁴. For example, one participant gave the example of creating a restricted story for updates about video games they were playing. As participants suggested, this could be afforded by letting one advertise a link to opt into joining the audience, or through a public list shown on one’s profile. In either case, such affordances to advertise curated audiences ought not to expose them by default, and instead require one to actively share or list them.

8.2.3 Help people to connect to community

As we discuss in *Part II*⁵⁵, one of the most positive findings from studies 1 and 2 was the way social platforms helped participants learn about being LGBTQ+ and connect to community⁵⁶. We now present design recommendations related to supporting people to do this:

- *Design to help people explore online content while protecting privacy* (§ 8.2.3.1, p. 234).
- *Design to help people find community and support in the physical realm* (§ 8.2.3.2, p. 235).
- *Design to support a diverse community* (§ 8.2.3.3, p. 236).
- *Design to use AI in ways that support understanding and exploration* (§ 8.2.3.4, p. 236).

⁵² See *Curating spaces to interact with trusted audiences* (§ 5.3.5.1.1, p. 131).

⁵³ See *Posting less curated presentations* (§ 5.3.5.1.2, p. 132).

⁵⁴ See *Allowing for greater selective visibility* (§ 7.4.2.1, p. 209).

⁵⁵ See *Social platforms are vital for developing identity and finding community* (§ 6.2, p. 172).

⁵⁶ See *Technologies for self-discovery* (§ 4.3.1, p. 55) and *Engaging with LGBTQ+ content* (§ 5.3.1, p. 76) respectively.

8.2.3.1 Design to help people explore online content while protecting privacy

Our participants in *Part II* often stumbled across LGBTQ+ content they identified with, and which helped them explore and enact their identities, similar to the findings of prior work (Delmonaco & Haimson, 2023; Fox & Ralston, 2016; McConnell et al., 2017). As part of *Study 3*, the concept *Suggested topics* (§ 7.3.5.1, p. 202, Figure 7.8) was designed to help facilitate exploration of LGBTQ+ content, and participant responses to it in the evaluation sessions were positive. However, some raised concerns about how it might be designed to protect privacy and to present a broader range of topics. We discuss recommendations for the former in this section, and the latter in a subsequent ⁵⁷.

Features that help people explore online content and communities should conceal people’s activity by default to reduce the risk of unintentional disclosure. For example, participant responses to *Suggested topics* (§ 7.3.5.1, p. 202, Figure 7.8) in the *Study 3* evaluation sessions highlighted concerns that the topics they explored might be revealed to others, and be problematic for those who had not disclosed their identities. Some participants suggested that being able to use a feature such as *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) might mean they would not separate content consumption between multiple accounts, and expressed similar concerns ⁵⁸. As one participant described, he used an alt-account on Instagram to follow people who post NSFW content as a way to hide this from the followers of his main account. Implementing *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) could offer a way for him to follow everything from one account while maintaining separate content feeds, however, such privacy measures were not considered in the design of the concepts. Regardless of what kinds of content participants are seeking out, being able to do so privately is important. As we found in *Investigating current social platform experiences* (§ II, p. 52), and in line with prior work, the privacy afforded by being able to explore being LGBTQ+ online compared to in the physical realm, means that it is a safe resource for self-exploration without having to disclose one’s identity. For example, a number of participants across studies 1 and 2 described how social platforms provided a connection to peers that they would not have been able to access otherwise ⁵⁹. As a result, and similar to Carrasco and Kerne (2018), we recommend that social platforms obscure the content people are interacting with by default. This could be tied in with audience curation features so that people are given control over who the traces of their activities are shown to ⁶⁰.

⁵⁷ See *Design to support a diverse community* (§ 8.2.3.3, p. 236).

⁵⁸ See *Providing ways to elude visibility* (§ 7.4.2.2, p. 210).

⁵⁹ See *Technologies for self-discovery* (§ 4.3.1, p. 55) and *Learning about being LGBTQ+* (§ 5.3.1.1.1, p. 76).

⁶⁰ See *Design to allow flexibility in curating audiences* (§ 8.2.1.3, p. 222).

8.2.3.2 Design to help people find community and support in the physical realm

In *Part II*, many participants described how social platforms not only helped them find connections to peers online, but also led them to meeting people in the physical realm. Many described befriending people they met on dating apps, and how they provided an initial way for them to meet other queer young people ⁶¹. Some also described how they had attended social events that had been organised or advertised on social platforms and where they met peers ⁶². However, many participants described issues with mismatched expectations on dating apps, or a desire for apps that would help them find friends ⁶³. Participants in the *Study 3* co-design workshops highlighted how they had found the ability to make social connections on dating apps particularly useful when travelling. Based on this insight, and drawing inspiration from the *Study 2* findings they had been presented with, they created the concepts that became *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, p. 202, Figure 7.9).

Platforms seeking to support people to make social connections ought to help orient people to places or areas where they can find community. Participants in the *Study 3* evaluation sessions appreciated the concept of *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, p. 202, Figure 7.9) and thought it would be useful when travelling ⁶⁴. In particular, they thought that it would help orient them towards places and events at which they could find other LGBTQ+ people. In addition, many commented how they would like the ability to use such features in their local communities as well. As some suggested, *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, p. 202, Figure 7.9) could be particularly helpful for those who are isolated or who do not know where to find peers in their local areas.

Information and resources provided should be relevant to the community and allow people to contribute through crowdsourcing affordances. A strength of *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, p. 202, Figure 7.9) for many participants was that the information it would provide would specifically targeted at LGBTQ+ people, and likely more relevant compared to generic information on the internet. Historically, many paper-based guides existed to help LGBTQ+ people find spaces that were targeted at or accepting of the community ⁶⁵, and integrating such features into social platforms provides a way for such information to be more accessible while also offering new possibilities for community involvement. As some participants suggested, people should be able to add reviews, comments or suggestions to provide further information or context. This echoes concepts created as part of participatory design sessions with trans people conducted by Haimson et al. (2020, p. 8) where multiple groups created versions of “Trans Yelp” to crowdsource information about local businesses. Crowdsourcing features are also supported by the experiences of

⁶¹ See *Using dating apps as a way to find peers* (§ 5.3.6.1.4, p. 149).

⁶² See *Finding community and peer support in more loosely defined sub-communities* (§ 5.3.6.1.3, p. 147) and *Using dating apps as a way to find peers* (§ 5.3.6.1.4, p. 149).

⁶³ See *Navigating mismatched expectations on dating apps and issues around consent* (§ 5.3.6.4, p. 158) and *Using dating apps as a way to find peers* (§ 5.3.6.1.4, p. 149), respectively.

⁶⁴ See *Helping people find their footing in the community or when travelling* (§ 7.4.4.1, p. 215) where we describe participants’ reactions to the concept.

⁶⁵ See Swab (2020) for examples of such guides.

several *Study 2* participants who described how they had learned from others in local LGBTQ+ subcommunities, often through Facebook groups or on Reddit ⁶⁶. Such information and resources could also be provided through conversational interfaces, as participants in the *Study 3* evaluations suggested ⁶⁷.

Above we offer recommendations for supporting people to find a range of types of connections on dating apps ⁶⁸. Based on responses to *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, p. 202, Figure 7.9) we also suggest that people are able to flag themselves as happy to be guides or to provide local knowledge.

8.2.3.3 Design to support a diverse community

While participants in the *Study 3* evaluation sessions appreciated the design of *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, p. 202, Figure 7.9), they critiqued the variety of information that it offered. The concept was designed to help people while travelling, so we wanted it to show information for a city that was not where the evaluation sessions were taking place. The co-design workshops where the concept for *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, p. 202, Figure 7.9) was envisioned were held in San Francisco, and to pay homage to this fact, we decided to set the mockup to display information for the city. To do so, we looked online for real events, venues and support services in the city that were advertised as being for the LGBTQ+ community to incorporate into the mockups. However, as some participants in the evaluation sessions rightly pointed out, the featured events and venues focused primarily on the dominant scene for queer men in San Francisco, and did not represent a wide cross-section of the community ⁶⁹. Similarly, participants in *Study 2* often lamented that the content they see on social platforms only represents a narrow slice of what it means to be a queer man ⁷⁰. Such experiences highlight that social platforms should be designed in ways that are mindful of supporting a wide range of interests and do not unnecessarily contribute to reinforcing dominant norms that can perpetuate harm.

8.2.3.4 Design to use AI in ways that support understanding and exploration

Participants in the *Study 3* evaluation sessions appreciated uses of AI that would support understanding. Similar to our *Study 2* participants ⁷¹ and prior findings (Wongsomboon et al., 2023), some thought that dating apps could be overwhelming and an AI assistant like *Grindr Bot* (§ 7.3.3.1, p. 199, Figure 7.5) could be helpful ⁷². For example, by helping people understand slang that is used on dating apps, as is shown in one of the mockups (see Figure 7.5b, p. 200). Similarly, participants appreciated how *Suggested topics* (§ 7.3.5.1, p. 202, Figure 7.8) could

⁶⁶ See *Learning about being LGBTQ+* (§ 5.3.1.1.1, p. 76).

⁶⁷ See *Helping people find their footing in the community or when travelling* (§ 7.4.4.1, p. 215).

⁶⁸ See *Design to support variation in the kinds of connections people are looking to make* (§ 8.2.2.1, p. 226).

⁶⁹ See *Supporting a wide range of interests* (§ 7.4.4.2, p. 216).

⁷⁰ See *Images of what it is to be a queer man are not diverse* (§ 5.3.3.1.1, p. 95).

⁷¹ See *Finding dating apps uncomfortably sexualised or overwhelming* (§ 5.3.6.4.1, p. 159).

⁷² See *Using AI to support understanding* (§ 7.4.3.2, p. 213).

help them explore online content and learn more about being LGBTQ+. Although participants did raise some concerns about the accuracy of such features ⁷³, their responses to features that supported understanding and exploration were positive compared to other concepts which used AI or other automated systems to make decisions for them. This suggests that features which offer contextual support to users or aid exploration may be good use cases for incorporating AI into social platforms. Designers of AI-based features for social platforms should provide transparency to users, as we recommend above ⁷⁴, and be aware of the limitations of the models they rely on.

8.3 Design challenges

While many of our findings from this work led to the development of the design recommendations above, some surfaced issues or tensions for which we do not have prescriptive guidance. We describe these as design challenges, outlining our findings, connecting them to prior work, and suggesting directions for future design work. We describe the following challenges:

- *Protecting safety while maintaining anonymity* (§ 8.3.1, p. 237).
- *Balancing authenticity and idealised content* (§ 8.3.2, p. 238).
- *Matching people beyond physical appearance* (§ 8.3.3, p. 240).

8.3.1 Protecting safety while maintaining anonymity

Our participants were ambivalent about anonymity on dating apps – it could both be an enabler of some of the negative experiences they had, while also allowing them the safety to engage with other on social platforms. For example, some *Study 2* participants described how they saw anonymity on dating apps such as Grindr as enabling people to harass them ⁷⁵, but it was also something that allowed many the discretion they desired to use the app comfortably ⁷⁶. Similarly, while *Study 3* participants acknowledged the reputation of blank or faceless profiles on Grindr as often sending unwanted messages, many described the importance of being able to be anonymous on the platform, and did not like features that might make it more difficult to interact anonymously ⁷⁷.

Geography is often a factor that can impact peoples' negotiations around safety and visibility as well. For example, there can be differences between rural and urban

⁷³ See *Providing transparency and control over automated, algorithmic and AI features* (§ 7.4.3, p. 211).

⁷⁴ See *Design to give people transparency over the algorithms that present content to them* (§ 8.2.1.2, p. 221).

⁷⁵ See *Dating app experiences reinforce negative ideals* (§ 5.3.3.1.4, p. 99).

⁷⁶ See *Maintaining discretion or anonymity on dating apps* (§ 5.3.4.3.3, p. 129).

⁷⁷ See *Helping people connect more easily with matches but not blocking those who do not fit filters* (§ 7.4.1.4, p. 207).

areas (Hardy & Lindtner, 2017), as P21 in *Study 2* also highlighted ⁷⁸. At a wider level, differing attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people across cultures and geographies can also shape how people approach visibility, and increase the potential harm caused by unintentional or unwanted disclosure (Sadika et al., 2020; Steinfeld, 2020).

As Stardust et al. (2023) highlight, dating apps are increasingly relying on surveillance and partnerships with law enforcement in an attempt to address safety concerns, but this can also make those with marginalised or stigmatised identities less safe. In addition, collecting sensitive data around people’s identities and interactions with others raises issues of consent (Stardust et al., 2023; Strengers et al., 2021). Stardust et al. (2023) also point to research around “real” name policies to highlight another issue with attempts at identity verification to solve safety issues. As prior work has found, such policies can be detrimental, especially for trans people whose legal names may not match their identities (Haimson & Hoffmann, 2016). Furthermore, something inherent to designs that rely on identity verification is the assumption that bad actors will behave better if their name is tied to their actions, something that does not necessarily hold true. As boyd (2012) highlights, people can still be cruel without a veil of anonymity. Due to these factors and despite some participants blaming anonymity for negative experiences, we do not recommend designing social platforms in ways that rely on identity verification to improve safety.

Instead, we suggest that a challenge for design is to explore how social platforms can increase safety without removing the potential for anonymity. Looking at how people navigate safety issues already may offer clues for for design. As we found in *Part II*, in the absence of official identity verification affordances, our participants already used a variety of safety strategies when using dating apps to protect themselves from harm ⁷⁹. For example, many participants described “verifying” the identities of people they met on dating apps by moving conversations to other platforms where they could get a better sense of who they were talking to ⁸⁰. Designing social platforms in ways that help to scaffold such safety practices has the potential to reduce harm while balancing needs for anonymity and privacy. However, as Stardust et al. (2023) argue, reducing harm facilitated by dating apps requires cultural changes around consent and relationships, not just technological solutions, especially if such approaches have the potential to cause harm in other ways. We therefore caution that while there is a role for improving the design of social platforms to improve safety, designers must not forget to consider the structural nature of such issues.

8.3.2 Balancing authenticity and idealised content

Tensions between idealised and more authentic content were often found in participants’ experiences and desires for future social platform features. This could

⁷⁸ See *Maintaining discretion or anonymity on dating apps* (§ 5.3.4.3.3, p. 129).

⁷⁹ See *Safety strategies were common* (§ 6.5.5, p. 183).

⁸⁰ See *Avoiding “toxic” people, catfishes and bots* (§ 5.3.6.5.1, p. 162).

be in relation to the content they saw, but also in the posts that they made. For example, many *Study 2* participants described the negative impacts of seeing content that idealised only a certain kind of queer men⁸¹ while also describing how they enjoyed seeing such content because they found it engaging⁸². Similarly, even though they lamented how others might post only the best moments, many participants shared how they too curated an attractive image of themselves on social platforms⁸³.

While the pressure to post idealised content is part of a broader structural issue within the queer community⁸⁴, as participants described, the design of social platforms can shape how this plays out online. For example, many *Study 2* participants described how they presented less curated sides of themselves where they were able to curate spaces with trusted audiences⁸⁵. As *Study 2* participants described, the design of dating apps in ways that centre physical appearance also contribute to the need to curate an attractive image in line with community norms⁸⁶.

An added challenge to designing social platforms in ways that improve social platform experiences for those using them, is that this can often be misaligned with the goals of the companies that operate them, often to get people to use them as much as possible to drive advertising revenue (DeVito et al., 2021b). As some of our *Study 2* participants found when they took steps to reduce the amount of idealised content they saw on social platforms, the resulting experience, while helping them to avoid negative self-comparison, could become boring⁸⁷. Some participants spoke about how social platform companies wanted their products to be addictive. For example, in response to *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7), some *Study 3* evaluation session participants expressed that while they liked the concept, they did not think Instagram would build such a features as it would give people too much control over the algorithm⁸⁸. On the other hand, it is possible that affording such control to people could provide desirable experiences that make people want to use platforms, for example, above we discuss how Bluesky is now offering similar features⁸⁹.

Above we offer recommendations which, if implemented, may offer people ways to avoid seeing, or subvert their need to share, idealised content. For example, recommending affordances that give people control over algorithmic content suggestions, or more flexibility over curating audiences to make it easier to share backstage presentations⁹⁰. However, these recommendations likely have the

⁸¹ See *The need to conform to the image of an ideal queer man* (§ 5.3.3.1, p. 95).

⁸² See *“Toxic” content can be engaging* (§ 5.3.3.2.1, p. 104).

⁸³ See *Curating an attractive image* (§ 5.3.4, p. 107).

⁸⁴ See *How idealisation shapes experiences* (§ 6.4, p. 177) where we discuss this.

⁸⁵ See *Being more authentic with trusted audiences* (§ 5.3.5.1, p. 131).

⁸⁶ See *Dating app experiences reinforce negative ideals* (§ 5.3.3.1.4, p. 99).

⁸⁷ See *Engaging with idealised presentations* (§ 5.3.3.2, p. 104) where we describe how participants saw content they deemed “toxic” as engaging.

⁸⁸ See *Providing control over algorithmic content feeds* (§ 7.4.3.1, p. 211).

⁸⁹ See *Design to give people agency over the content they see* (§ 8.2.1.1, p. 219).

⁹⁰ See *Design to give people agency over the content they see* (§ 8.2.1.1, p. 219) and *Design to allow flexibility in curating audiences* (§ 8.2.1.3, p. 222), respectively.

potential to offer only modest at best improvements overall to cultures of idealised content on social platforms. A significant challenge for future design work is to explore more comprehensive counters to such cultures. Given the structural nature of the problem, design solutions may be able to shift it, or too encourage more supportive social platforms, but it is unlikely they will be able to solve it alone (Haimson, 2025; Stardust et al., 2023).

8.3.3 Matching people beyond physical appearance

Although *Study 3* did not explore designs related to helping people connect on dating apps in ways that did not centre physical appearance, this was something suggested by a number of *Study 2* participants. As we found in *Part II*⁹¹, many *Study 2* participants experienced a culture that privileged a narrow view of how a queer man ought to look, and this led to negative experiences including discrimination and harassment. This is consistent with prior work which has found modern dating app designs privilege displays of physical appearance (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Brubaker et al., 2016; Filice et al., 2019).

As a result, some participants envisioned future platforms that were less focused on physical appearance, perhaps also decentring dating as their main focus and instead encouraging more platonic connections⁹². For example, P3 designed “Adam and Steve” which he described “focuses on common interests rather than just physicality” (see Figure 5.17). Similarly, P5 envisioned “Friendspace” which would highlight common interests, and use them to match people (see Figure 5.18). Given the negative experiences of those who do not fit normative ideals of what a queer man ought to look like, it is important to consider how social platforms can be designed in ways that connect people beyond physical appearance as the main focus.

8.4 Overarching discussion

In the sections above, we describe a number of design recommendations and challenges. In this section, we discuss these at a higher level, commenting on common design considerations and challenges to implementation that we foresee.

8.4.1 Common design considerations

A core tenet of a number of the design recommendations we make is that they respond to the situational nature of the experiences participants wanted to have. Many social platform features are currently designed in ways that assume people are static and not dynamic beings with shifting identities or desires. Prior work has problematised how social platform design often assumes identity to be static, particularly in relation to difficulties faced by trans people and others undergoing life transitions (Haimson & Hoffmann, 2016; Liu et al., 2020).

⁹¹ See *How idealisation shapes experiences* (§ 6.4, p. 177).

⁹² See *Dating app experiences reinforce negative ideals* (§ 5.3.3.1.4, p. 99) where this is discussed

As part of our design recommendations, we problematise assumptions that peoples' preferences are static and suggest ways that social platforms could be designed to be more adaptable to changing situations. For example, while Instagram currently offers the ability to flag that one is “interested” or “not interested” in specific content, the feature is designed in a way that assumes preferences are static and does not afford easily updating preferences day-to-day. In contrast, as part of *Design to give people agency over the content they see* (§ 8.2.1.1, p. 219), we highlight that peoples' preferences may change based on situational factors, for example, state of mind, and suggest allowing people to create different customisable modes. Similarly, dating apps are often designed with a static “looking for” profile field, but what someone is after can depend on the person they are interacting with, as well as other situational factors⁹³. To address this, in *Design to support variation in the kinds of connections people are looking to make* (§ 8.2.2.1, p. 226) we argue that dating apps should afford people the ability to dynamically alter what they are “looking for” in response to both the connections they are after in the moment, and the people who they interact with.

Our design recommendations are also made in ways that recognise that not everyone wants to have the same experience. For example, while we advocate strongly for consent in a number of the recommendations, we acknowledge that some of our participants did not want to use features that would block NSFW content⁹⁴. As a result, we advocate for defaults that support practices of consent, but allow people to opt out of automated flagging systems that may otherwise get in the way⁹⁵.

8.4.2 Structural barriers to implementing our recommendations

The recommendations we describe above are all design solutions that respond to the experiences of our participants in *Part II*, and the desires and reflections of participants in *Study 3*. However, many of the issues described by participants, for example, surrounding consent on dating apps, are structural, and cannot be solved with technology alone (Haimson, 2025; Stardust et al., 2023). This does not mean that implementing our design recommendations will not be helpful, rather that they are only part of the solution. For example, Stardust et al. (2023) argue that safety features on dating apps such as Tinder cannot alone solve issues of sexual violence and that addressing it will involve multiple components, such as education, resourcing, building respect for boundaries and supporting survivors. Similarly, as Haimson (2025, p. 22) describes technological solutions might be considered “stopgaps” that can help people address challenges “in a limited fashion until systemic change can be achieved”.

⁹³ See *Supporting people to communicate what they are looking for and expectations in dynamic ways* (§ 7.4.1.2, p. 205) where we highlight this as part of participants' responses to the concept *Signalling what you are looking for* (§ 7.3.2.2, p. 199, Figure 7.4).

⁹⁴ See *Providing more agency over receiving or viewing NSFW pictures* (§ 7.4.1.1, p. 204).

⁹⁵ See *Design automated safety features in ways that give people control over how they are applied* (§ 8.2.2.4, p. 231).

Another structural barrier relates to implementing our recommendations. As DeVito et al. (2021b, p. 3) note, the values imbued in the design of social platforms often reflect the goals of the companies, for example, “platform growth, boosting content engagement, and avoiding legal trouble”, which may conflict with the values or best interests of people using them, especially if they are part of marginalised groups. Although, based on our participants experiences and responses to the mockups presented in *Study 3*, our design recommendations are likely to result in more positive outcomes for people using social platforms, their appeal may not be shared by the creators of social platforms. However, as DeVito et al. (2021b) argue, addressing disconnects in values between platforms and those who use them is likely to support most positive experiences, and ultimately in the best interests of platforms. As we describe in the following chapter ⁹⁶, we have sought to make it easier for social platform designers to implement our recommendations by providing them in an accessible format beyond this thesis, however, structural factors such as conflicts with the business models of social platform companies may limit their implementation.

8.5 Chapter 8 Conclusion

In this chapter, we responded to the second research question by presenting recommendations and challenges to improve the design of social platforms for queer young men. In describing and providing a rationale for each, we drew on the findings from our three studies and included discussions of prior work. We now summarise our recommendations and challenges.

In *Give people more agency over their experiences on social platforms* (§ 8.2.1, p. 219), we recommend ways that social platform can be designed to give people more agency over the content they see and share. As we found in *Study 2*, the content that participants saw could have both positive and negative impacts, for example, helping them learn about their identities or reinforcing “toxic” ideals about what it means to be a queer man ⁹⁷. Participants often pointed to content recommendation algorithms as responsible for deciding what kind of content they saw ⁹⁸, with a number expressing desires for more control over them, or taking steps to avoid triggering content being suggested ⁹⁹. Addressing desires for more control over algorithmic suggestions concerns, we offer recommendations for building features that let people customise content feeds situationally based on the concept *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) ¹⁰⁰. Following this, we recommend that platforms include features which provide more transparency over automated features such as algorithmic content feeds ¹⁰¹. The two subsequent design

⁹⁶ See *Chapter 9: Design resource*.

⁹⁷ See *Learning about and accepting one’s identity* (§ 5.3.1.1, p. 76) and *The need to conform to the image of an ideal queer man* (§ 5.3.3.1, p. 95), respectively.

⁹⁸ See *Navigating algorithmic suggestions* (§ 5.3.1.3, p. 86)

⁹⁹ See *Avoiding content that could be triggering* (§ 5.3.5.3.2, p. 142).

¹⁰⁰ See *Design to give people agency over the content they see* (§ 8.2.1.1, p. 219).

¹⁰¹ See *Design to give people transparency over the algorithms that present content to them* (§ 8.2.1.2, p. 221).

recommendations focus on how to give people more agency over the content that they share. As we discuss in *Chapter 6: RQ 1 Discussion*, many *Study 2* participants faced barriers to curating audiences of their social platform presentations¹⁰². In the first, we provide recommendations for affording people more control over targeting the audiences of their posts, based on responses to the concept *Smart social circles* (§ 7.3.4.1, p. 201, Figure 7.6)¹⁰³. In the second, we discuss the importance of offering ways to easily afford retroactively curating social platform posts¹⁰⁴.

Our second set of design recommendations focus on combating mismatched expectations on dating apps, and issues of consent over NSFW content on a range of social platforms¹⁰⁵. Given that people use dating apps for a range of reasons, we recommend designing dating apps in ways that consider how to better support this, and help people signal what they are looking for¹⁰⁶. Following this, and drawing on our findings about matching systems from *Study 2*¹⁰⁷ we recommend giving people the agency to decide who can message them without forcing matching¹⁰⁸. We then describe recommendations to support getting consent before NSFW can be sent or shown to people¹⁰⁹, and discuss how to design automated systems that might support such features¹¹⁰. Finally, our last design recommendation in this set describes how to build consent into audience curation features¹¹¹.

Our third set of recommendations focuses on designing to help people connect to community¹¹². As we discuss in *Chapter 6: RQ 1 Discussion*, one of our most positive findings was around the ways social platforms helped our participants connect with peers and the wider community¹¹³. Our first recommendation concerns supporting people to explore online content and communities while protecting their privacy¹¹⁴. We then turn to describing recommendations to design features that help connect people in the physical realm. Following this, we discuss how features that aim to connect people to communities ought to support diverse groups and interests¹¹⁵. Our final recommendation is to consider implementing AI features in ways that can be used to support understanding or contextual suggestions instead of automating decisions for people¹¹⁶.

In this chapter, we also described three open challenges for design based on our

¹⁰² See *Encountering barriers to curation* (§ 6.3.4, p. 176).

¹⁰³ See *Design to give people transparency over the algorithms that present content to them* (§ 8.2.1.2, p. 221).

¹⁰⁴ See *Design to support retroactive curation* (§ 8.2.1.4, p. 223).

¹⁰⁵ See *Help people to navigate mismatched expectations and improve consent over NSFW content* (§ 8.2.2, p. 225).

¹⁰⁶ See *Design to support variation in the kinds of connections people are looking to make* (§ 8.2.2.1, p. 226).

¹⁰⁷ See *Differing dating app cultures and designs shaped experiences* (§ 6.5.2, p. 181).

¹⁰⁸ See *Design to give people agency over who can message them without forcing matching* (§ 8.2.2.2, p. 228).

¹⁰⁹ See *Design to support consent over NSFW content* (§ 8.2.2.3, p. 229).

¹¹⁰ See *Design automated safety features in ways that give people control over how they are applied* (§ 8.2.2.4, p. 231).

¹¹¹ See *Design to build consent into audience curation features* (§ 8.2.2.5, p. 232).

¹¹² See *Help people to connect to community* (§ 8.2.3, p. 233).

¹¹³ See *Social platforms are vital for developing identity and finding community* (§ 6.2, p. 172).

¹¹⁴ See *Design to help people explore online content while protecting privacy* (§ 8.2.3.1, p. 234).

¹¹⁵ See *Design to support a diverse community* (§ 8.2.3.3, p. 236).

¹¹⁶ See *Design to use AI in ways that support understanding and exploration* (§ 8.2.3.4, p. 236).

work. The first described tensions resulting from efforts to protect peoples' safety by removing the ability to be anonymous ¹¹⁷. As we argued, although many participants blamed anonymity for facilitating negative experiences, particularly on dating apps, the ability to be anonymous is important given that LGBTQ+ identities are still stigmatised. In addition, identity verification systems can be detrimental for those with multiply marginalised identities, for example, those who are trans. Drawing on prior work, we highlighted how identity verification is not the solution for experiences on dating apps, and argued that a challenge for design is to explore alternative ways to improve safety. The second challenge we describe relates to the complex relationship many participants had with idealised content. Although many participants described the negative impact it could have on them, some also found it engaging or described ways that they created such content. However, the extent of the negative impact which continually seeing content that reinforced hegemonic masculinity had on participants calls for design approaches to address these tensions. The third, and related, design challenge we described was based on our participants desires for dating apps to help people connect beyond physical appearance.

In the final section, we provided further discussion of our recommendations. We started by describing common design considerations among our recommendations, for example, the ways that they are designed to acknowledge the situational nature of interactions. We then discussed structural barriers to implementing our recommendations, highlighting that many of the issues participants described are structural and cannot be solved through technology alone, even if they may be able to help in some ways. We also discuss that despite being supported by our empirical findings, social platforms may be reluctant to implement our recommendations.

In the following chapter, we describe how we translated the design recommendations and tensions we presented here into a design resource for social platform designers.

¹¹⁷ See *Protecting safety while maintaining anonymity* (§ 8.3.1, p. 237).

Chapter 9

An online design resource to engage social platform designers

9.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we describe the creation of an online design resource for social platform designers ¹. As prior work has found, there is a research-practice gap in HCI which means that academic findings are not often used by those working in industry (Colusso et al., 2017). Haimson (2023) found a similar gap in their work exploring how the trans community has been involved in technology design. As they argue, technology design can be “most impactful” (Haimson, 2023, p. 12) when it involves community members, however, most of the work that takes a participatory approach does not result in creating technologies that get deployed and can be used by those who need them. Conversely, they argue, the technology that makes it into the world often does not take a human-centred approach. It is infeasible and beyond the scope of this thesis for us to create social platforms that implement our design recommendations. However, given this gap between HCI research and industry practice, it would be remiss to not attempt to bridge it in some way. As Colusso et al. (2017) highlight, part of the issue is that academic research findings are often not in forms that can be easily used by practitioners.

To address this gap and make our findings more accessible to those who work on social platforms in industry, we created an online design resource. It is a website that presents our design recommendations ², as well as the concepts developed in *Study 3*, and the probe kit we created as part of *Study 2*. Rather than being

¹ The design resource can be found at <https://designresource.tomma.so>. As this is a living website and may be updated in response to feedback, a version that is fixed while this thesis is under examination can be found at <https://thesis-version.designresource.tomma.so>.

² See *Chapter 8: RQ 2 Discussion*.

confined to this long academic thesis, or the paper written about *Study 3* that we have already published ³, presenting our design recommendations in this way will allow them to be more easily found, shared, and hopefully, implemented. In the sections that follow, we describe how we conceptualised the resource, discuss design considerations, showcase the resource in its current form, and describe its technical creation.

9.2 Conceptualising the resource

We chose to make the design resource a website so that it would be easy for practitioners to find, use and share. We decided that the design recommendations we presented in *Chapter 8: RQ 2 Discussion* were the most important findings from this thesis to share with those working on social platforms, and so they would be the focus of it. As Colusso et al. (2017) found in their work exploring how to create resources that translate academic research for practitioners, making guidance actionable and providing visual examples may help them better integrate findings into their work. Following this, we envisioned a website that would present our recommendations in clear language, and use the mockups created as part of *Study 3* to demonstrate how they might be implemented.

We considered sharing the Figma ⁴ files we created as part of mocking up the design concepts in *Study 3*, and creating a toolkit that designers could use to implement our features. However, we decided that given we designed our mockups to be based on existing platforms to make them more realistic to participants in the evaluation sessions ⁵, we did not want people to take our mockups and use them to create new platforms that look like Grindr or Instagram. Additionally, we did not want to limit the ways our recommendations can be implemented to specific design languages. Our contribution is the ideas that we present, the mockups are merely examples of how they might be employed in improving the design of current platforms, in the language of two particular social platforms most used by our participants.

In addition to the design recommendations and concepts, we wanted to share the probes we created as part of *Study 2* ⁶. We found that they were an effective tool for exploring participants' experiences with social platforms, providing a way for them to reflect between interviews, and a foundation for the second interview where we discussed them. So that others may benefit from our use of probes, we decided to share their design rationale, examples of how participants used them, and the original design files we used to create them.

So that our work may be used more readily, we decided to release the design resource under a Creative Commons license. We picked the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license ⁷ as it is the most permissive license they offer

³ See Armstrong et al. (2024).

⁴ Figma is a digital design tool. "Figma." 2025. Figma, Inc. <https://www.figma.com>.

⁵ See *Creating mockups* (§ 7.2.2.2, p. 194).

⁶ See *Designing a custom probe kit* (§ 5.2.1.2, p. 64).

⁷ Creative Commons. 2025. "Attribution 4.0 International Deed." Accessed July 8, 2025.

and means that our work can be used commercially.

9.3 Design considerations

To design the resource, we looked to academic guidance and existing online design resources. We start by briefly summarising recommendations from prior work before exploring common features of a number of online design resources.

We draw on two studies of how design resources are used. In the first, Colusso et al. (2017) worked with professional designers to understand how and why they used (or did not use) academic research in their work. In the second, Sas et al. (2014, p. 1971) interviewed expert HCI researchers to investigate how to translate “findings into actionable ideas that inform design”. We now draw on their guidance for creating effective recommendations.

Design recommendations should be presented in clear language and made actionable so that they are useful (Colusso et al., 2017; Sas et al., 2014). As Colusso et al. (2017, p. 960) described, designers often find academic design recommendations hard to read or not “to the point”, and with limited time may choose simpler resources. To be actionable, recommendations should also be grounded in what is possible to create, and not so speculative that designers will struggle to implement them (Sas et al., 2014). Beyond the text of guidance, including visual examples and quotes were also highlighted as making design resources more useful. Visual examples of design recommendations can help designers understand them and support brainstorming of new solutions based on them (Colusso et al., 2017). In addition, designers may prefer resources that are not all text-based as they can be more visually appealing and easier to scan when looking for design inspiration (Colusso et al., 2017). Meanwhile, Colusso et al.’s (2017) participants described how quotes could contextualise design recommendations, add credibility to them, and be useful in discussions where designers need to advocate for following them. Similarly, Sas et al.’s (2014) participants highlighted the importance of demonstrating validity of design implications. They describe three kinds of validity: empirical, theoretical, and external. Empirical validity relates to how implications are grounded in fieldwork data, theoretical to how they connect to broader theory, and external to the extent to which they can be generalised beyond the fieldwork (Sas et al., 2014).

In addition to reviewing academic research describing design resources, we turned to existing examples of websites that we could draw inspiration from. Four examples stood out as providing actionable guidance in an effective way across a range of contexts. Table 9.1 provides an overview of the resources we looked at, providing details of each and reproducing the way they describe themselves. Although each website we looked at had a unique design, we identified common features and elements between them, which we describe in Table 9.2. As we discuss in the following section, we implemented each of these features in the design of our

Design resource	Description
Child Rights by Design (CRD) childrightsbydesign. 5rightsfoundation.com	“Child Rights by Design is a principled vision to inspire innovators to help realise children’s rights when designing digital products and services.” (The Digital Futures Commission, 2023)
Ethical Web Principles (EWP) www.w3.org/TR/ ethical-web-principles/	“The web should be a platform that helps people and provides a positive social benefit. As we continue to evolve the web platform, we must therefore consider the consequences of our work. The following document sets out ethical principles that will drive W3C’s continuing work in this direction.” (Daniel Appelquist et al., 2024)
Human Interface Guidelines (HIG) developer.apple.com/design/ human-interface-guidelines/	“The HIG contains guidance and best practices that can help you design a great experience for any Apple platform.” (Apple, Inc., 2025)
Neurodiversity Design System (NDS) neurodiversity.design	“The NDS is a coherent set of standards and principles that combine neurodiversity and user experience design for Learning Management Systems.” (Soward, n.d.)

Table 9.1: Design inspirations for our design resource

resource.

9.4 The resource

In the previous section, we identified a number of design considerations described by prior work and features employed by existing design resources. We now turn to showcasing and discussing the design of our resource. We start by briefly describing each of the pages in the resource before we discuss how we have responded to the design considerations identified above.

9.4.1 Overview of pages

The home page of the design resource provides a brief introduction and then lists each of the recommendations, concepts, and probes (see Figure 9.1). The about page describes the background to the resource, giving details about authorship and the research that led to its creation (see Figure 9.2). Each recommendation listed on the home page links to a dedicated page that provides details about it (see Figure 9.3 which shows one of these pages). Similarly, the concepts that can be seen at the bottom of the home page link to individual pages which describe them and present the mockups (see Figure 9.4 which shows a concept page). Finally, there is a dedicated page for the probe kit which describes it, provides instructions for how to use it, and offers links to download templates for each probe (see Figure 9.5).

Feature	Description	Employed by		
		CRD	EWP	HIG NDS
Background information	The resource offers details about its creation to contextualise the recommendations or guidelines.	■	■	■
Graduated levels of detail	Key ideas are emphasised in the design with headings or bold text, and descriptions follow this in paragraph text.	■	■	■
Overall list of recommendations	The front page presents a list of guidelines or topics that are linked to individual pages with descriptions.	■	■	■
Sidebar navigation	Guidelines or recommendations are listed in a sidebar for easy navigation between them.	■	■	■
Visual examples	Some of the guidelines or recommendations are demonstrated using visual examples.	■	■	■
Quotes from research	Quotes from user research are used to help contextualise recommendations.	■	■	■

Table 9.2: Key features of the design resources in Table 9.1. Coloured cells indicate that the design resource used a feature.

9.4.2 Design decisions

In this section, we draw on the design considerations and features we identified above to discuss the decisions we made about the design of the resource. We start by describing how we supported actionability.

9.4.2.1 Actionability

Colusso et al. (2017) and Sas et al. (2014) provided guidance that recommendations ought to be actionable and easy to read. In looking at how the example design resources we drew on achieved this, we identified that they all used graduated levels of detail in their design, conveying key information in headings, and then providing more detail that could be drilled into. Following their guidance, and the examples, we therefore chose to rewrite our recommendations from how they are presented in *Chapter 8: RQ 2 Discussion* into such a format. Figure 9.3 shows how we did this for one of our recommendations, *Design to support consent over NSFW content* (§ 8.2.2.3, p. 229). The recommendation starts with a descriptive heading and a short paragraph explaining it at a high-level. Below this, there are a series of prescriptive recommendations on how to achieve this. The headings provide an actionable recommendations, and short paragraphs directly below them provide context and an example of how they can be achieved.

A design resource for creating more positive social platform experiences

This design resource provides recommendations to improve the design of social platforms for the people who use them. It also includes mockups of new social platform features and a probe kit created to better understand how people use social platform features.

The resource is based on PhD research done with queer young men, but the design recommendations are likely to be broadly applicable to everyone. [Learn more](#) about it or see the resources below.

Design recommendations

These recommendations provide prescriptive guidance on designing social platforms in ways that better support peoples' experiences. They are broken up into three broad categories.

1. Give people more agency over their experiences on social platforms

- Give people agency over the content they see
- Give people transparency over the algorithms that present content to them
- Allow flexibility in curating audiences
- Support retroactive curation

2. Help people to navigate mismatched expectations and improve consent over NSFW content

- Support variation in the kinds of connections people are looking to make
- Give people agency over who can message them without forcing matching
- Get consent before showing NSFW content
- Design automated safety features in ways that give people control over how they are applied
- Build consent into audience curation features

3. Help people to connect to community

- Help people explore online content while protecting privacy
- Help people find community and support in the physical realm
- Support a diverse community
- Use AI in ways that support understanding and exploration

Design concepts

These concepts came out of co-design workshops with technology designers to explore how to improve the design of social platforms. Our design recommendations are based on participant responses to them in

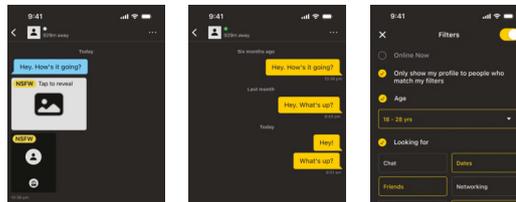


Figure 9.1: Interactive design resource: Home (designresource.tomma.so).

9.4.2.2 Demonstrating validity

In following Sas et al.'s (2014) guidance about validity, we chose to focus on describing empirical and external validity in the design resource. Adding the theoretical links they suggest into the design resource could risk going against Colusso et al.'s (2017) findings that designers want simple, actionable advice that does not engage too deeply with theory. This tension likely reflects that Sas et al.'s (2014) participants were academic design researchers and not people working in industry. However, we note that such academic audiences are likely better served by the more theoretical descriptions of our design recommendations as they are presented in *Chapter 8: RQ 2 Discussion*, or in the academic paper we published (Armstrong et al., 2024).

Following the example of the three examples that provided background information about their creation, we included information about our resource in the about page

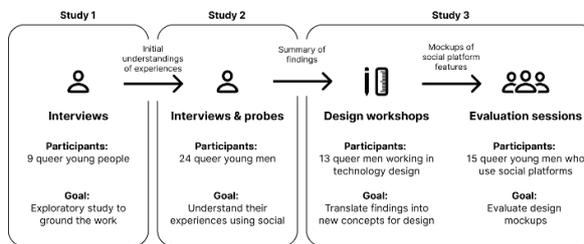
About the design resource

I created this design resource based on research done as part of my PhD in Human-Computer Interaction at the **University of Technology Sydney**. My research explores how to improve the design of social platforms for and with queer young men. I was supervised by **Prof. Elise van den Hoven** and **Prof. Simon Buckingham Shum**.

I created this resource so that my findings would be more accessible to people working in industry on social platforms. Below, I describe the process for creating it, starting with how I conducted the research that informs it.

Research overview

I conducted my PhD research across three studies. In the first two, I investigated current experiences with social platforms. Then in the third and final study, I ran co-design workshops and evaluation sessions to explore new concepts for design. The image below shows an overview of this process.



Overview of the three studies

Below I provide a short summary of the research approach but more information about my PhD can be found on my [website](#).

Studies 1 and 2 – Exploring current experiences

My findings from the first two studies showed that social platforms were a double-edged sword for my participants – they could help them learn about being LGBTQ+, but also open them up to what they described as "toxic" ideals within the queer community. Six main themes were developed from the second study which are shown in the image below.



Figure 9.2: Interactive design resource: About (designresource.tommaso.so/about).

(see Figure 9.2) and addressed its validity as part of this. To do this, we included descriptions in the design resource of how we developed our recommendations based on our research, and scoped the claims that we made about their validity. For example, we described how we conducted our three studies and limitations of our approach. We also described the generalisability of our recommendations, highlighting that while they were created within a specific context – how queer young men in Australia use social platforms – but that they were written to be agnostic of this demographic and are broadly applicable.

9.4.2.3 Navigational features

All four example design resources we examined ⁸ had a sidebar to easily navigate between individual recommendations and three had an overall list on the front page. We chose to implement both of these features to make it easy to navigate our design

⁸ See Table 9.1.

Design recommendations**Give people more agency over their experiences on social platforms**

- Give people agency over the content they see
- Give people transparency over the algorithms that present content to them
- Allow flexibility in curating audiences
- Support retroactive curation

Help people to navigate mismatched expectations and improve consent over NSFW content

- Support variation in the kinds of connections people are looking to make
- Give people agency over who can message them without forcing matching
- **Get consent before showing NSFW content**
- Design automated safety features in ways that give people control over how they are applied
- Build consent into audience curation features

Help people to connect to community

- Help people explore online content while protecting privacy
- Help people find community and support in the physical realm
- Support a diverse community
- Use AI in ways that support understanding and exploration

Get consent before showing NSFW content

One of the most negative findings from our research was how often people saw not safe for work (NSFW) content without their consent. While such content can have a place, people should be asked for consent before it is shown.

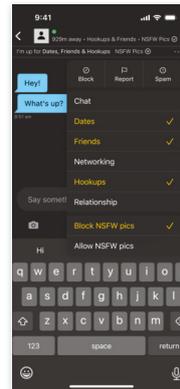
Let people communicate if they want to receive NSFW content on dating app profiles

If people can send images on a dating app or other social platform where people are likely to send NSFW images, consider allowing people to specify if they are happy to receive them. For example, Grindr has a profile field labelled "Accepts NSFW pics" where people can specify "Yes", "Not at first" or "Never".

Let people consent to receiving NSFW pics for specific people

In addition to letting people consent to NSFW content on their profile, there should be an option to adjust this per conversation. For people who do not consent to receiving NSFW content at first or ever, this should default to blocking NSFW content, but for those who always consent, this should default to allow.

The mockup on the right shows how this could be implemented by adding options to the menu in a Grindr chat. Similarly, and as we recommend in **Support variation in the kinds of connections people are looking to make**, the middle part of the menu lets people specify what they're looking for at a conversation level too.



Part of the concept **Signalling what you are looking for**.

Give people the option to enforce their preferences around NSFW content

It's great if people can communicate whether they consent to receiving NSFW content, but people should also be given options to make sure others respect their choices. For example, giving people the option to block others from sending them NSFW pictures as part of a first message, or to blur any NSFW pictures in the chat.

The mockup on the left shows how we extended Grindr's options around NSFW pictures (the four options at the top), and added the two settings below to give people options to block or blur NSFW

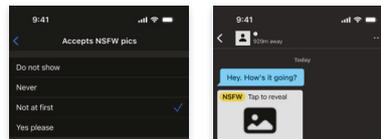


Figure 9.3: Interactive design resource: The page for the design recommendation “Get consent before showing NSFW content” (designresource.tomma.so/recommendations/consent-nsfw-content).

resource. The home page (see Figure 9.1) lists each of the recommendations, concepts, and probes so that people can peruse all of them at a glance, allowing them to quickly get a sense of the breadth of the design resource. The recommendation and concept pages (see Figure 9.3 and Figure 9.4, respectively) have a sidebar on the left which allows navigation. It also highlights the current page to provide context of where the reader is.

9.4.2.4 Inclusion of end-user quotes

Although we only found quotes from user research used in the Child Rights by Design resource, we decided to include them following recommendations from Colusso et al. (2017) whose participants described the many ways they could be useful to designers. Figure 9.3 shows how a quote was included, in this case

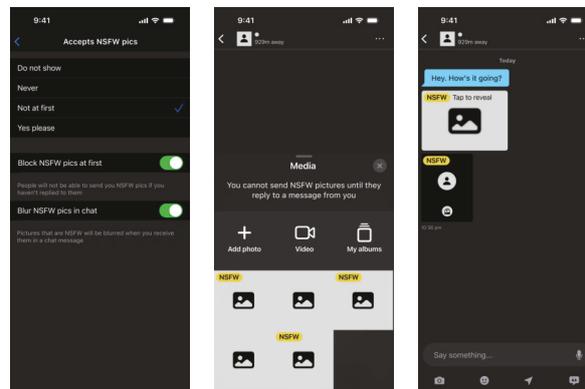
Design concepts

- **New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pictures**
- Block repeated messages
- Providing more control over who can find and message you
- Signalling what you are looking for
- Grindr Bot
- Local Guide
- Smart social circles
- Focus modes for content feeds
- Suggested topics

New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pictures

Some platforms, for example, Instagram, hide pictures sent by those one is not following by default — that way, users can decide if they want to reveal what may be a problematic image from an unknown other. Alternatively, some platforms, such as Tinder, do not allow pictures or videos to be sent at all. On the other hand, some do not mind receiving NSFW content, especially on dating apps where they may see it as part of facilitating sexual encounters with those they interact with. Some platforms, such as Grindr, recognise variation in whether users would like to receive NSFW content — they offer three profile options for communicating one's openness to receiving NSFW pictures, "yes please", "not at first" and "never". While this allows users to explicitly consent, or not, it relies on someone being proactive enough to check before deciding whether to send NSFW content.

This concept extends the current options given by Grindr and allows users to automatically block or blur NSFW pics.



New options for blocking or blurring NSFW pictures are given alongside the existing profile options.

If blocking is enabled, people will be blocked from sending NSFW pics at first. To make this clear, a new message is shown when sending pictures, and a new NSFW label highlights which pictures the app has identified as being explicit.

If blurring is enabled, NSFW pics will be blurred until the user taps to open them.

Social Platform Design Resource. Made by [Tommaso Armstrong](#) as part of his PhD research in Human-Computer Interaction. [Learn more](#). © 2025 and licensed under [CC BY 4.0](#) ©

Figure 9.4: Interactive design resource: The page for the concept “New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics” (designresource.tomma.so/concepts/block-nsfw-content/).

highlighting how one of the *Study 3* evaluation sessions participants thought he would appreciate the ability to blur NSFW pictures when they are received (see the last paragraph of the section “Give people the option to enforce their preferences around NSFW content”).

9.4.2.5 Visual examples

Colusso et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of using visual examples, not only to demonstrate recommendations but also to help designers brainstorm and to make design resources more appealing. Two of the example design resources used visual examples, while two were purely textual. Given the usefulness of including them, and that we could draw on the mockups we created as part of *Study 3*, we chose to include them. In *Chapter 8: RQ 2 Discussion*, we did not reproduce images of the

Probes

- [About the probe kit](#)
- Your ideal social platform
- A day of social platforms
- Social platform characters
- Moments worth screenshotting
- Honest platform ads

About the probe kit

As part of my PhD work to better understand the experiences of queer young men on social platforms, I designed a kit of five probes to use with participants. They served as an effective way to understand experiences beyond the constraints of an interview. They were also a playful way to create shared understanding and build rapport with my participants.

But first, what are probes?

Probes are a kit of activities given to research participants to give glimpses into their lives. They're designed to be playful, evocative and reflective. Initially, they were used to provide inspiration for designers but now they're often interpreted with participants.

Why did I use them?

If I were studying how a group of people use technology at work, I could observe them throughout the work day, take notes, ask questions where appropriate and get a decent understanding of their experiences.

But, our experiences on social platforms can be deeply personal and private. We also use them at all hours of the day. And it's difficult to track someone's use of social platforms, especially across a range of different apps. And even if that weren't the case, analytics give limited insight into people's experiences with and attitudes to the platforms.

Meanwhile, interviews can be great for getting people to describe their experiences but they can be disconnected from reality and offer a limited window into people's lives.

I needed a way to get a deeper insight into people's experiences beyond the confines of an interview that would respect participants' privacy and be more practical than observation.



The probe kit.

The probe kit

The probes were packaged in a translucent coloured plastic folder that also contained a welcome card and stationery that could be used to complete them (coloured pens, a glue-stick and coloured stickers intended to be used with [A day of social platforms](#)).

Start here!

Hi _____,
 Thanks for agreeing to participate in my research project, I really appreciate it and hope you'll enjoy being involved.
 In this pack, you'll find five different probes (activities) that I've made for you to complete. The idea is that they're creative, interesting and fun ways for you to explore and share the way that you use social platforms in your day-to-day (without me having to look over your shoulder 24/7). In the next interview, we'll talk about what you've created.
 Each of the five probes explore something different about how you use and perceive social platforms. They all have a rationale and some instructions on them to help you understand what to do with them.
 All the best,

The welcome card

The welcome card was included to guide participants to use the kit. It starts by thanking them for being involved and reintroducing the purpose of the kit. It then includes general tips and instructions for using the kit and the author's contact details in case they had questions or needed help.

Figure 9.5: Interactive design resource: About the probe kit (designresource.tomma.so/probes/about/).

concepts in the text, instead choosing to refer back to where the mockups are originally presented as part of *Chapter 7: Study 3*. However, as part of the design resource, we decided to include mockups alongside the text of recommendations for easy reference (see Figure 9.3). In doing so, we only include the mockup images from concepts that are relevant to the specific recommendation, although the concepts are reproduced in their entirety as part of a design concepts section (see Figure 9.4). For example, the recommendation “Give people the option to enforce their preferences around NSFW content” only shows the first and third mockups from the concept “New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics”.

9.5 Technical creation

In this section, we describe how we created the design resource site and the considerations that informed this. We built the design resource using Gatsby⁹, a development framework and static site generator. We decided to build it using a static site generator because they create websites that are simple and cheap to deploy. In general, they work by generating a website upfront, using code and any data sources at build time to create static HTML, JavaScript and CSS files that can be hosted anywhere without the need for any runtime or processing steps beyond serving the files when people visit the website. This makes it cheap to host, as there is no need to pay for compute resources, compared to dynamic websites where a server process needs to run every time the site is visited. In addition, there is no software that needs to be maintained to keep the website running. Combined, these factors make it much easier to host static sites over a long-term period.

We chose Gatsby as the static site generator to use because we are familiar with it and have used it in the past for other projects. To build the site, we used an existing template that we had developed and configured it to generate a site from files we created for each of the design recommendations, concepts and probes. While the site itself is technically static – there is no dynamic generation of pages when someone visits it – we can update it by amending the code or data sources, generating a new version, and then publishing it to the web. Using a framework such as Gatsby means that updates are easy to perform, for example, changing the title of a design recommendation in the source file means any references to it on the site will be updated too. As we use a hosting provider designed for static sites, Netlify¹⁰, the building and publishing steps are automated and the site can be deployed within 1-2 minutes of any updates. Together, these decisions provide a good foundation for the design resource to be easily maintained while also supporting longevity beyond the author’s PhD completion.

9.6 Chapter 9 Conclusion

In this chapter, we described the creation of a design resource¹¹ that we built to make our research more accessible to those working on social platforms in industry. The resource presents the design recommendations we discussed in *Chapter 8: RQ 2 Discussion* in a format that is more actionable and useful for this audience. It also showcases the concepts we developed in *Study 3*, and open-sources the probe kit we created as part of *Study 2*. In designing the resource, we looked to prior work in academia for guidance on how to create translational design resources and present design recommendations. We also drew inspiration from example design resources, identifying features they used as part of their presentation, and describing how we incorporated these in our design. Finally, we described the technical creation of the

⁹ “Gatsby.” 2025. Gatsby, Inc. <https://www.gatsbyjs.com>.

¹⁰ “Netlify.” 2025. Netlify. <https://www.netlify.com>.

¹¹ It can be found at <https://designresource.tomma.so>.

resource, highlighting the considerations that shaped its software architecture. In the following part, *Part IV*, we conclude the thesis.

Part IV

Conclusion

Chapter 10

Thesis contributions

10.1 Introduction

This thesis extends understandings of how social platforms shape the experiences of queer young men and explores new directions for social platform design to improve their experiences. In this section, we provide a brief overview of the approach we took and the structure of this chapter.

We conducted this research across three main studies. *Study 1* (see Chapter 4) served to ground this research by using semi-structured interviews with 9 LGBTQ+ young people to **understand their use of social platforms**. *Study 2* (see Chapter 5) built on these findings by exploring, through semi-structured interviews and the use of probes with 24 participants, **how queer young men use social platforms**. *Study 3* (see Chapter 7) then used the findings from *Study 2* to ground co-design workshops with 13 technology designers to **generate new concepts for design**. Mockups of these concepts were then evaluated with 15 participants. In *Chapter 8: RQ 2 Discussion*, based on participant evaluations of these mockups, and findings about current experiences from prior studies, we derived a number of **design recommendations, but also recognise open challenges**. We used these recommendations, as well as the design concepts from *Study 3* and the probe kit from *Study 2* to create **a design resource for social platform designers** (see Chapter 9).

In the following two sections, we summarise our key findings in response to the two research questions, drawing on our detailed discussion chapters ¹:

RQ 1 What role do social platforms play in shaping the experiences of queer young men? (section 10.2)

RQ 2 How might social platforms be designed to be more supportive of the experiences of queer young men? (section 10.3)

¹ See *Chapter 6: RQ 1 Discussion* and *Chapter 8: RQ 2 Discussion*.

Following this, we describe the four key contributions of this thesis in section 10.4: extending current understandings of how queer young men use social platforms, a probe kit that can be used by researchers studying social platform usage, extending current understandings of how to design social platforms based on participant responses to new design concepts, and finally, a design resource that can be used by social platform designers. We then discuss the limitations of this thesis in section 10.5. Section 10.6 then describes areas for future work based on this thesis before the thesis ends with concluding remarks in section 10.7.

10.2 RQ 1 What role do social platforms play in shaping the experiences of queer young men?

In *Chapter 6: RQ 1 Discussion*, we discussed our findings from the first two studies in relation to the first research question. We now briefly summarise our findings.

Social platforms were a double-edged sword for our participants, helping them learn about being LGBTQ+ and connect to peers, but also opening them up to harm, for example, through exposure to content that caused them to engage in negative self-comparison, or lateral violence. Many participants targeted audiences of their presentations online to maintain strategic outness, consistent with prior work. However, we also found that participants used audience curation affordances in ways not previously discussed in prior work with LGBTQ+ populations in HCI, highlighting a narrow focus on identity concealment and sensitive disclosures. Dominant ideas about what it means to be a queer man shaped many participants' experiences, creating pressure to perform hegemonic masculinity and leading many to engage in negative self-comparison. However, we found that participants' relationship with idealised content that reinforced such norms was complex – despite describing the negative impacts it could have on them, they also found it engaging and shared such content themselves in the hopes of presenting an attractive image. Some described strategies for dealing with such pressures, and as we highlight, they suggest future design opportunities. We found that participants' use of dating apps could help them find peers but also open them up to harm. In addition, their use of dating apps was often linked to other social platforms they used, highlighting the need to study them as part of people's social platform ecosystems. Finally, we described NSFW ways that our participants used social platforms that have not been previously acknowledged within HCI, highlighting both a need to include consent considerations in the design of social platform affordances, and that more attention ought to be paid to how people use social platforms as part of sexuality.

For a more in-depth summary of our response to RQ 1, see *Chapter 6 Conclusion* (§ 6.7, p. 187).

10.3 RQ 2 How might social platforms be designed to be more supportive of the experiences of queer young men?

In *Chapter 8: RQ 2 Discussion*, we describe design recommendations and challenges that respond to the second research question. These are based primarily on participant evaluations of the concepts we developed through the co-design workshops in *Study 3*, but also draw on findings from studies 1 and 2 where relevant. We also describe common design considerations and structural barriers to implementing our recommendations.

Our recommendations focused on three main areas which we now briefly summarise. The first area comprised of design recommendations that if implemented would afford people more control over the content that they see and share on social platforms. For example, we recommend that people are given more control over the algorithms that present content to them, and that there is more flexibility in audience curation features when they share content. The second area focused on helping people navigate mismatched expectations on dating apps and improving consent over NSFW content, two major issues described by our participants. For example, recommending dating apps are designed to better support variations in what people are looking for, providing guidance for designing matching systems, and detailing how the design of audience curation features ought to consider supporting consent. The final area of design recommendations focused on helping people connect to community, both online and in the physical realm. For example, recommending that peoples' privacy is supported when exploring online content, that dating apps consider ways to help people find community and support in the physical realm, and that any such features are designed to support a diverse community.

We also described three open challenges for design that we did not address through our design explorations in *Study 3*: how to design social platforms in ways that improve safety which do not rely on identity verification as part of the solution, how to design social platforms in ways that better balance authenticity and idealised content to reduce the negative impacts of self-comparison, and how to design dating apps that match people beyond physical appearance.

Finally, we described design considerations that were common across many of our recommendations, for example, we discuss how many of the design recommendations consider the situational nature of what participants wanted to do on social platforms. We also discussed structural barriers to implementing our recommendations, highlighting that some of the issues they address cannot be solved solely through technological interventions, and highlighting possible reluctance from social platforms to follow our guidance.

Thesis §	Contribution	Type	Domain
10.4.1	Broadening understandings of how social platforms shape the experiences of queer young men	Empirical	Academic
10.4.2	A probe kit to understand social platform experiences	Artefact	Academia and industry
10.4.3	Extending understandings of how to design social platforms to be supportive of the experiences of queer young men	Empirical	Academia
10.4.4	A design resource for social platform designers	Artefact	Industry

Table 10.1: Thesis contributions using the taxonomy of Wobbrock and Kientz (2016)

For a more in-depth summary of our response to RQ 2, see *Chapter 8 Conclusion* (§ 8.5, p. 242).

10.4 Thesis contributions

In this section, we describe the four contributions of this work. Following Wobbrock and Kientz’s (2016) taxonomy of research contributions in HCI, we make two empirical and two artefact contributions. As they describe, “empirical research contributions are the backbone of science. They provide new knowledge through findings based on observation and data gathering” and can arise from “experiments, user tests, field observations, interviews, surveys, focus groups...” (Wobbrock & Kientz, 2016, p. 40). Following this, our findings from the semi-structured interviews we conducted in *Study 1* and *Study 2*, and from the evaluation sessions in *Study 3*, can be deemed empirical contributions. In describing artefact contributions Wobbrock and Kientz (2016, p. 40) write that they “include new systems, architectures, tools, toolkits, techniques, sketches, mockups, and envisionments that reveal new possibilities, enable new explorations, facilitate new insights, or compel us to consider new possible futures” and that “new knowledge is embedded in and manifested by artifacts and the supporting materials that describe them”. The probe kit that we created as part of *Study 2* and open-sourced as part of the design resource aligns with this definition as an artefact – it is a new tool that people can use as part of social platform research, and one that embeds new knowledge about techniques that can be used in creating probes. Finally, the design resource is an artefact that draws on empirical findings that helps social platform designers consider new features and techniques for improving design which are demonstrated through mockups. Table 10.1 provides an overview of contributions, their type, and the domain which they target. In the sections below, we describe each contribution in detail.

10.4.1 Empirical contribution: broadening understandings of *how social platforms shape the experiences of queer young men*

This work contributes to accounts within HCI of how queer young men use social platforms in a number of ways which we now describe. It confirms existing accounts of the importance of social platforms in the early stages of exploring LGBTQ+ identity as a way to learn about being queer and trans, and to connect to community and peers. It highlights the often sidelined role that dating apps can play in offering a way to find community and the ways that their use is often intertwined with that of other social platforms. In doing so, it argues, following others such as Byron et al. (2021), for the importance of including dating apps in social platform research with LGBTQ+ people, and contributing accounts of the way different dating apps are seen in relation to each other. It confirms prior findings related to the importance of curation affordances to conceal LGBTQ+ identity while also highlighting the ways that participants' practices of managing their self-presentation went beyond this. It adds to accounts of lateral violence and idealised presentations in the queer male community, describing the impact this had on participants experiences and the ways that they saw themselves engaging with this culture. Finally, it contributes novel findings within HCI about the ways participants used social platforms in NSFW ways, highlighting the importance of future work in this area to address safety implications and adding to arguments to that sexuality is an area that deserves more attention within the discipline.

10.4.2 Artefact contribution: *a probe kit to understand social platform experiences*

As part of *Study 2*, we developed a probe kit to use with participants to understand how social platforms shaped their experiences. Despite their usefulness in building dialogue with people (Çerçi et al., 2021; Wright & McCarthy, 2010), few have used probes to explore people's relationships with social platforms. Indeed, where probes have been mentioned in research related to social platforms, they have been "technology probes" where the activities have involved responding to or interacting with prototypes (e.g., (Jhaver et al., 2023)).

The probe kit we developed as part of *Study 2* proved an invaluable tool for understanding our participants' relationships with social platforms. Using the probe kit also helped build rapport with participants and gave them an opportunity to reflect between interviews on what they wanted to share. For example, some participants did not reveal their use of NSFW alt accounts in the first interview but decided to share this as part of their probe responses. Each of the probe activities provided insights into different aspects of participants' use of social platforms as we now describe at a high-level. *Probe 1: Social Platform Characters* (§ 5.2.1.2.1, p. 66) gave participants a way to reflect on the range of different accounts they used across

multiple platforms, and provided us a way to explore them without having to ask repetitive questions about each. *Probe 2: Moments Worth Screenshotting* (§ 5.2.1.2.2, p. 67) helped participants capture experiences on social platforms that they wanted to share. *Probe 3: A Day of Social Platforms* (§ 5.2.1.2.3, p. 68) provided a high-level window into how participants used social platforms over the course of a day. *Probe 4: Honest Platform Ads* (§ 5.2.1.2.4, p. 69) proved a sharp tool for surfacing participants' gripes with different platforms in a creative (and often amusing) way. Finally, *Probe 5: Your Ideal Social Platform* (§ 5.2.1.2.5, p. 70) gave participants an opportunity to envision a desired social platform and highlighted what they saw as important features.

The use of caricature and satire – as part of *Probe 1: Social Platform Characters* (§ 5.2.1.2.1, p. 66) and *Probe 4: Honest Platform Ads* (§ 5.2.1.2.4, p. 69) respectively – to probe participants' perceptions of each platform and their use of them, proved especially useful. While probe activities are often designed to be oblique or evocative (Derix & Leong, 2019), our use of caricature and satire as part of the design of probe activities appears to be novel. Participant responses to these probe activities were particularly insightful, and led to dialogue in the second interviews that got to the core of the role they saw social platforms playing in their lives. This suggests that incorporating such elements as part of probe kits is a useful strategy for exploring participant relationships with technology.

Our contribution is the design of the probe kit and the digital assets to create it. As an artefact, knowledge about how to construct probes is embedded in its design (Wobbrock & Kientz, 2016), for example, as we describe above, in relation to the use of caricature and satire. In addition, the probe kit is a tool that can be used by others studying peoples' experiences on social platforms. As part of the online design resource for social platform designers that we have created ², we open-sourced the design of the probe kit, providing instructions and digital assets for deploying the probe kit as part of future research.

10.4.3 Empirical contribution: extending understandings of *how to design* social platforms to be supportive of the experiences of queer young men

In recent years, there has been a great increase in work within HCI that explores the experiences of LGBTQ+ people on social platforms. Such work often identifies issues with the design of such platforms and suggests directions for design, however, stops short of providing actionable design concepts or evaluating their proposals. Indeed, there has been comparatively little work that has used design approaches to explore how to improve the experiences of queer and trans people on social

² See section *Artefact contribution: a design resource for social platform designers* (§ 10.4.4, p. 265)

platforms, and even less that attempts to evaluate the resulting concepts.

As part of this work, we used a research through design approach to conceive and evaluate new design concepts, in the process, building on our empirical findings about the experiences of queer young men on social platforms. This work resulted in a paper published in the ACM Conference on Designing Interactive Systems (Armstrong et al., 2024) that contributes many of the design concepts we developed, empirical results from evaluations with participants and implications for design. As part of this thesis, we include these contributions as well as further discussion of how to design social platforms to better support the experiences of queer young men ³.

The design mockups created as part of this work and evaluated with participants aimed to address a number of issues with the current design of social platforms ⁴. Exploring how to improve consent was a major theme. For example, *New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics* (§ 7.3.1.1, p. 197, Figure 7.1) aimed to improve consent when exchanging NSFW content on dating apps such as Grindr, an oft described problem (Dietzel, 2024). Similarly, *Signalling what you are looking for* (§ 7.3.2.2, p. 199, Figure 7.4) proposed a way to better communicate expectations when interacting with people on dating apps, another major issue on dating apps (Wongsomboon et al., 2023). *Smart social circles* (§ 7.3.4.1, p. 201, Figure 7.6) alongside demonstrating an improved affordance to curate audiences when posting content (something often called for in work around self-presentation on social platforms with LGBTQ+ people), highlighted the importance of considering consent in designing such affordances. While prior work has explored folk theories people develop about social platform algorithms, *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) and *Suggested topics* (§ 7.3.5.1, p. 202, Figure 7.8) explored designs that would give people more control over content recommendation algorithms. In the process, *Focus modes for content feeds* (§ 7.3.4.2, p. 201, Figure 7.7) approached consent from another direction, giving form to ideas about consent described by Im et al. (2021), among others. Meanwhile, *Local Guide* (§ 7.3.5.2, p. 202, Figure 7.9) took one of the many positives of dating apps, their ability to connect people to community and help them find peers, and proposed a way to further support this.

Based on participant responses to the mockups in the *Study 3* evaluation sessions, as well as our findings from the previous two studies, we described a number of design recommendations. Like the mockups they are based on, they aim to address issues in the design of social platforms that we have identified through this work. While the designs created and evaluated as part of *Study 3*, and our design recommendations involve only some aspects of the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people, they nevertheless contribute actionable mockups and guidance based on our empirical findings, and extend our understandings of how to design social platforms for this community.

³ See *Chapter 8: RQ 2 Discussion*.

⁴ See *Design mockups* (§ 7.3, p. 196).

10.4.4 Artefact contribution: *a design resource for social platform designers*

This work contributes to academic discourse around how LGBTQ+ young people use social platforms ⁵ and how the design of platforms could be improved to better support their experiences ⁶. However, as Haimson (2023) critique in their review of design work involving trans communities, academic human-centred design processes often do not result in deployment of systems that benefit those who were involved. They propose a number of approaches that could help trans technologies be deployed beyond academic settings and note how this could benefit design work for other marginalised groups. Two of the approaches centre around connecting those who do design work with those that have the time, skills and resources to deploy new systems. While Haimson's (2023) proposals are at a program level and not targeted at the level of individual project, researcher or designer, they make a strong argument that design work ought to be connected to those with the power to deploy it. Similarly, Colusso et al. (2017) argue that there is a gap between research and practice in HCI which means that academic findings are often not used by those working in industry.

This research did not set out to design a new social platform that could be developed and deployed, rather it aimed to explore how the design of existing social platforms could be improved to better support the experiences of those involved. Unfortunately the nature of how the social platforms used by our participants operate precludes us from deploying our design concepts – none of the platforms our participants used ⁷ offer a fully featured API that would allow us to create a new client. For example, it is not possible for us to deploy an alternative Grindr client that offers the consent features we co-designed as part of *Study 3* without creating an entirely new platform. However, by building an online design resource for social platform designers ⁸ that presents our design concepts and findings, we make our work more accessible and actionable for those working outside of academia. While it is too early to measure the impact that this will have, we hope that it will prove a valuable resource for those working in industry and who are more likely to be in the position to deploy our work.

10.5 Limitations

This thesis focused primarily on queer men aged 18-28 living in Sydney ⁹. Our findings are, therefore, limited in the extent to which they can be generalised across

⁵ See *Empirical contribution: broadening understandings of how social platforms shape the experiences of queer young men* (§ 10.4.1, p. 262)

⁶ See *Empirical contribution: extending understandings of how to design social platforms to be supportive of the experiences of queer young men* (§ 10.4.3, p. 263)

⁷ While Twitter used to allow third-party clients, API access has been restricted in recent years and was not feature complete (cite this).

⁸ The design resource is described in *Chapter 9: Design resource*, and can be found at <https://designresource.tomma.so>.

⁹ See *Aim and scope* (§ 1.5, p. 5) where we justify our focus on this demographic.

wider populations. While all LGBTQ+ young people may have similar experiences in some ways due to heteronormativity, there are nuances in experiences between subgroups which impact the transferability of findings based solely on queer and trans young men to the wider community. Similarly, while queer and trans young men in other areas with similar cultures and attitudes to the metropolitan Australian context in which we conducted this research may share similar experiences, this impacts the transferability of findings to areas where being LGBTQ+ is more highly stigmatised.

Our engagement methodology intrinsically shapes the data gathered, and hence, the insights that can be gleaned. For example, our findings from *Part II* cannot represent the full extent of the ways participants used social platforms, and similarly, our research through design work in *Part III* could not be exhaustive in exploring new social platform features. Additionally, given that it was infeasible to evaluate our designs from the *Study 3* co-design workshops under real-world conditions¹⁰, it is possible that implementations of our recommendations may produce different or unexpected results. Nevertheless, this thesis provides a wide-ranging account of the ways in which social platforms shaped our participants' experiences and offers a number of ways in which their design may be improved that are based on participatory research.

10.6 Future work

In this section, we offer six directions for future work based on our findings. These are:

- *Designing more dynamic platforms* (§ 10.6.1, p. 266).
- *Designing platforms in ways that reduce negative impacts of idealised presentations* (§ 10.6.2, p. 267).
- *Designing features to build trust on dating apps which do not rely on identity verification* (§ 10.6.3, p. 268).
- *Including dating apps in social platform work* (§ 10.6.4, p. 268).
- *Researching the ways people use social platforms in NSFW ways* (§ 10.6.5, p. 268).
- *Investigating transferability of findings to other groups* (§ 10.6.7, p. 270).

10.6.1 Designing more dynamic platforms

As we describe in *Chapter 8: RQ 2 Discussion*¹¹, many of our design recommendations (and the concepts that they were based on) were designed to support situational variation in the ways people want to use social platforms. For example, recommending that people ought to be able to easily change between settings that determine what they are presented in algorithmic content feeds, or

¹⁰ See *Creating mockups* (§ 7.2.2.2, p. 194) where we justify this decision.

¹¹ See *Common design considerations* (§ 8.4.1, p. 240).

show what they are looking for with a specific person on a dating app if this differs from what their profile is set to ¹². Concepts that were designed in such ways in order to allow people to customise their experiences to respond to situational factors proved popular with participants in the *Study 3* evaluation sessions. However, we only explored a small number of ways in which such affordances could be implemented on social platforms. Future research through design work could investigate other ways social platforms could be designed in ways that support dynamic preferences.

10.6.2 Designing platforms in ways that reduce negative impacts of idealised presentations

As we describe in *Chapter 8: RQ 2 Discussion* ¹³, a significant challenge for design is to explore ways that social platforms can reduce the negative impacts of idealised content. As we found, many participants engaged negative self-comparison to images of queer men they saw on social platforms, and had complex relationships to such content ¹⁴. For example, despite acknowledging the negative impact it could have on them, many commented how they enjoyed seeing it, or how they presented such content themselves. In addition, many participants described negative encounters with hegemonic masculinity on dating apps, lamenting how image-based they often are ¹⁵. Although, as we discuss in framing the challenge, this is part of a broader structural issue surrounding hegemonic masculinity and the ways social platforms are designed, there is an opportunity for future work to explore ways to lessen the negative impact of idealised content. While such issues have been described by prior work (Breslow et al., 2020; Miller, 2018; Souza et al., 2025), there has been little work that has sought to address how design could play a role in reducing the impact of performances of hegemonic masculinity online. Our findings around the ways some of our participants were able to overcome negative self-comparison by gaining perspective, avoiding triggering content, or finding ways to cheat pressures to present such content ¹⁶ may offer hints for design solutions. For example, design solutions could help people gain perspective on what they are seeing, or create more spaces that encourage people to cheat expectations to present idealised content. On dating apps, design that decentre physical appearance, as we argue for in *Chapter 8: RQ 2 Discussion* ¹⁷, may also offer benefits.

¹² See *Design to give people agency over the content they see* (§ 8.2.1.1, p. 219) and *Design to support variation in the kinds of connections people are looking to make* (§ 8.2.2.1, p. 226), respectively.

¹³ See *Balancing authenticity and idealised content* (§ 8.3.2, p. 238).

¹⁴ See *How idealisation shapes experiences* (§ 6.4, p. 177), where we discuss our findings in relation to this.

¹⁵ See *Those who did not fit dominant ideals faced discrimination and harassment* (§ 6.5.4, p. 183)

¹⁶ See *Gaining perspective and avoiding triggering content could help participants overcome self-comparison* (§ 6.4.4, p. 179) and *Finding spaces to cheat the need to post idealised content* (§ 6.4.3, p. 178).

¹⁷ See *Matching people beyond physical appearance* (§ 8.3.3, p. 240).

10.6.3 Designing features to build trust on dating apps which do not rely on identity verification

Another challenge for design that we describe in *Chapter 8: RQ 2 Discussion*¹⁸ relates to addressing safety issues on dating apps. We found that, consistent with prior work, many of our participants experienced negative interactions on dating apps. Participants often attributed their negative experiences to the anonymity afforded by dating apps such as Grindr. However, we argue, following others (boyd, 2012; Haimson & Hoffmann, 2016; Stardust et al., 2023), that approaches to increasing safety that rely on identity verification are not adequate at best, and detrimental at worst. Although issues of safety and sexual violence on dating apps are structural and cannot be solved alone through technological interventions (Haimson, 2025; Stardust et al., 2023), future work should explore how to design platforms in ways that support peoples' safety, without relying on identity verification.

10.6.4 Including dating apps in social platform work

As we argue in *Chapter 6: RQ 1 Discussion*¹⁹, dating apps should be included in broader research involving social platforms. As we found, dating apps were often places where our participants found peers or learned about being queer. In addition, for many of our participants, their uses of, and presentations on, dating apps were linked to other social platforms they used. Prior work in HCI has argued that focusing on specific platforms can miss the ways people see them as part of the wider ecosystem of social platforms they use (DeVito et al., 2018b; Zhao et al., 2016). Similarly, our findings suggest that excluding dating apps from work involving social platforms can miss the ways that they are interlinked. As a result, we see a need for more work that explores such connections.

10.6.5 Researching the ways people use social platforms in NSFW ways

As we argue in *Chapter 6: RQ 1 Discussion*²⁰, there is a need for more work that explores that ways that people use social platforms in NSFW ways. A large rationale for doing such work is that it prompts considerations of consent that are often not made. For example, there are scarce mentions, if any, of consent in work around audience curation features, despite many of our participants describing how they used such features to share NSFW content. Similar to the way that studying how LGBTQ+ people use social platforms can be useful for understanding issues which impact broader communities (DeVito et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2024),

¹⁸ See *Protecting safety while maintaining anonymity* (§ 8.3.1, p. 237).

¹⁹ See *Dating apps can be social spaces and linked to other platforms* (§ 6.5.1, p. 180).

²⁰ See *Social platforms are used in NSFW ways* (§ 6.6, p. 184).

studying the ways that people use social platforms in NSFW ways may be enlightening for improving consent more broadly.

As others have argued, studies of sexuality have often been shied away from marginalised in HCI Birnholtz et al., 2015; Kannabiran et al., 2011. Although there has been some work in HCI that has explored sex, much of the work has focused on sex toys and robots, or on sexual violence (Zytko et al., 2021), while less attention has been paid to social platforms. However, our findings showed that many queer young men enjoyed or found benefit in using social platforms in NSFW ways, whether sharing NSFW content publicly or making social connections in NSFW spaces ²¹. Future work ought to further investigate how social platforms are used in NSFW ways. As we discuss above, this could have important safety implications. Beyond this however, and as Kannabiran et al. (2011) argue, sexuality is part of human life and deserves to be studied in a discipline that explores how human life intersects with technology.

10.6.6 Exploring how LGBTQ+ people curate their presentations beyond concealment of being queer and trans

As we argue in *Chapter 6: RQ 1 Discussion* ²², most of the work pertaining to the way LGBTQ+ young people curate audiences on social platforms focuses narrowly on identity concealment or sensitive disclosure. Although we acknowledge the importance of such work given the continued stigmatisation of queer and trans identities, this narrow focus means that other ways LGBTQ+ curate their presentations online has received much less attention in HCI. For example, we described many ways that our participants curated audiences beyond concealing their identities that have been scarcely discussed within HCI, if at all, for example, to present more authentic sides of themselves to trusted audiences, or to share NSFW content ²³. In addition, beyond concealment, a number of participants described how they used social platforms to assert being queer or trans. Future work that explores social platform use by LGBTQ+ people should explore curation practices beyond disclosure. In doing so, and as we argue in previous sections ²⁴, it should also consider including dating apps and NSFW social platform use as significant sites for connection to the LGBTQ+ community, peer support and sexual expression. This will allow a broader range of LGBTQ+ experiences to be explored, both mundane and explicit, and surface tensions or differences in practices that arise from using platforms across these varied contexts.

²¹ See *Using social platforms as part of sexuality* (§ 6.6.2, p. 186).

²² See *Curating beyond disclosure of identity* (§ 6.3.3, p. 176).

²³ See *Curating beyond disclosure of identity* (§ 6.3.3, p. 176) and *Social platforms are used in NSFW ways* (§ 6.6, p. 184), respectively.

²⁴ See *Including dating apps in social platform work* (§ 10.6.4, p. 268) and *Researching the ways people use social platforms in NSFW ways* (§ 10.6.5, p. 268).

10.6.7 Investigating transferability of findings to other groups

While our findings and design recommendations are based predominantly on studies targeting queer men, they may be applicable to other groups. However, we suspect that there are a number of ways our findings and recommendations may be broadly applicable. For example, our findings and recommendations surrounding the need for more consideration of consent in the design of social platforms have the potential to positively impact many others, including women and other LGBTQ+ people, who research has identified as disproportionately affected by sexual violence (Albury et al., 2019; Zytka et al., 2021). Similarly, our recommendation to design social platforms in ways that afford more flexibility over curating audiences of content ²⁵, are likely to benefit other groups for whom the often binary public or private audience curation features of current social platforms are limiting. Although it was beyond the scope of this thesis to investigate such transferability of our findings and recommendations to other groups beyond queer young men, this is an opportunity for future work.

10.7 Concluding remarks

As I described in the preface, this PhD was born from a desire to contribute back to the LGBTQ+ community by exploring ways that social platform design could be improved. Through this PhD project, I have been lucky enough to work with over 60 queer and trans participants, many of whom shared their experiences with me. Being trusted with their stories and learning about the many ways social platforms shape the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people, both for better and worse, has been profoundly rewarding. Although many described negative experiences, everyone had stories about how social platforms had helped them figure out who they were or find other people like them.

My goal through this thesis has been to contribute to both, better understanding the role that social platforms play in the lives of queer young men, and to shifting their design in ways that lead to more positive experiences. Through this work, I have had the pleasure of meeting many others working in LGBTQ+ research, as well as people in industry working on social platforms. I have also presented my findings to people working at a number of dating apps as part of meetings and invited talks, including at Grindr, Hornet and Feeld. Although there are structural barriers to addressing many of the issues described in this thesis, I am hopeful that this work can play a part in improving understanding of how queer and trans young people use social platforms and improving their experiences.

²⁵ See *Design to allow flexibility in curating audiences* (§ 8.2.1.3, p. 222).

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Appendices

Appendix A

Study 1

A.1 Information and consent documents



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
***Queer Well-Being and Digital Technology* UTS HREC REF NO. ETH17-1811**

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is Tommaso Armstrong and I am a student at UTS. My supervisor is Associate Professor Tuck Wah Leong.

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is to explore the links between the use of digital technology and well-being in the queer community. It is the first in a series of studies that will explore how digital technology may be better designed to support the well-being of queer people and the wider community.

WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?

You have been invited to participate in this study because you have expressed interest, identify as a queer person and use digital technology in your everyday life.

IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?

If you decide to participate, I will invite you to take part in a 2-3 hour semi-structured interview that will be audio recorded and transcribed. I will also ask that you complete a short questionnaire and assessment before the first interview.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?

Yes, there are some risks/inconvenience. These interviews involve questions that may be of a sensitive nature. If you feel distressed during the interview, please let me know immediately and we can cease the interview.

Mental Health Line 1800 011 511
 Lifeline 13 11 14 or online at lifeline.org.au

DO I HAVE TO SAY YES?

Participation in this study is voluntary. It is completely up to you whether or not you decide to take part.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I SAY NO?

If you decide not to participate, it will not affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Technology Sydney. If you wish to withdraw from the study once it has started, you can do so at any time without having to give a reason, by contacting me at tommaso.armstrong@student.uts.edu.au.

If you withdraw from the study, personal information pertaining to your involvement including any recorded interviews or transcripts will be destroyed.

CONFIDENTIALITY

By signing the consent form you consent to the research team collecting and using personal information about you for the research project. All this information will be treated confidentially. Identifiable information will be stored on secure devices that only the research team have access to. Your information will only be used for the purpose of this research project and it will only be disclosed with your permission, except as required by law.

We would also like to store your information for future use in research projects that are an extension of this research project. In all instances your information will be treated confidentially.

We plan to publish the results of the study as part of my dissertation as well as in conference and journal papers. In any publication, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified.

WHAT IF I HAVE CONCERNS OR A COMPLAINT?

Figure A.1: The first page of the Participant Information Sheet for Study 1.



If you have concerns about the research that you think I or my supervisor can help you with, please feel free to contact us at Tommaso.Armstrong@student.uts.edu.au or TuckWah.Leong@uts.edu.au.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

NOTE:

This study has been approved by the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee [UTS HREC]. If you have any concerns or complaints about any aspect of the conduct of this research, please contact the Ethics Secretariat on ph.: +61 2 9514 2478 or email: Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au, and quote the UTS HREC reference number. Any matter raised will be treated confidentially, investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

Figure A.2: The second page of the Participant Information Sheet for Study 1.

Appendix B

Study 2

B.1 Information and consent documents



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET INVESTIGATING HOW THE DESIGN OF SOCIAL TECHNOLOGIES SHAPES THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG QUEER MEN UTS HREC APPROVAL NUMBER: ETH21-5761

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is Tommaso Armstrong and I am a student at UTS. My supervisor is Associate Professor Tuck Wah Leong (TuckWah.Leong@uts.edu.au).

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is seeking to understand how the design of social technologies (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tinder, Grindr, etc.) shapes the experiences of young queer men. It aims to understand the impacts of the current designs of social technologies and to explore how they might be designed to be more supportive of the experiences of young queer men, and the wider queer community.

WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?

You have been invited to participate in this study because you have expressed interest, identify as a queer (e.g. gay/bisexual) man, are 18-28 and use social technologies in your everyday life.

IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?

If you decide to participate, I will invite you to

In the first study:

- Participate in two 1-hour semi-structured interviews that will be audio recorded and transcribed
- Complete a short set of activities that will be provided to you over two weeks between interviews (approx. 1-2 hours time required)

In the second study (around 3 months later):

- Attend 2-3 co-design workshops that will take 1-2 hours each. You may choose to attend as many or as few as you would like. The workshops will give involve collaboratively (with other participants) augmenting, re-designing or re-imagining the social technologies you use to improve them and give you the opportunity to envision desired future social technologies. The workshops will be audio recorded and transcribed.

Due to COVID, all activities will be run in a hybrid mode where it is possible to attend in person on the UTS campus or remotely via Zoom.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?

Yes, there are some risks/inconvenience. The interviews involve questions about your experiences using social technologies that may be of a sensitive nature. If you feel distressed during the interview, please let me know immediately and we can cease the interview. Although very unlikely, there may be a risk to the privacy and confidentiality of the data that you provide during this research. The research team will do their best to protect your privacy and confidentiality by de-identifying your data, only using anonymised accounts of your experiences in publications and securely storing your contact details. In the second study you are asked to be involved in group co-design workshops. As part of this you may end up in a group with someone you know or who knows you and who you do not wish to share your experiences of using social platforms as a queer person with. In this event, you will not be required to share anything you do not feel comfortable with and you may opt to attend another session where this is not an issue. If you do not feel comfortable with the idea of working collaboratively with other participants like you, you may not be able to be involved in that study. Finally, there is a risk due to COVID. The researchers will ensure that all face-to-face activities follow a COVID Safe plan and hand sanitiser and masks will be available for you to use. Alternatively, you may choose to attend every activity remotely over Zoom.

ACON www.acon.org.au/what-we-are-here-for/mental-health/#/gbti-counselling
Tewnty10 1800 184 527 or <https://www.twenty10.org.au/get-support/lets-talk/>
Mental Health Line 1800 011 511

Figure B.1: The first page of the Participant Information Sheet for Study 2.



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
INVESTIGATING HOW THE DESIGN OF SOCIAL TECHNOLOGIES SHAPES THE EXPERIENCES OF
YOUNG QUEER MEN UTS HREC APPROVAL NUMBER: ETH21-5761

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is Tommaso Armstrong and I am a student at UTS. My supervisor is Associate Professor Tuck Wah Leong (TuckWah.Leong@uts.edu.au).

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is seeking to understand how the design of social technologies (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tinder, Grindr, etc.) shapes the experiences of young queer men. It aims to understand the impacts of the current designs of social technologies and to explore how they might be designed to be more support of the experiences of young queer men, and the wider queer community.

WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?

You have been invited to participate in this study because you have expressed interest, identify as a queer (e.g. gay/bisexual) man, are 18-28 and use social technologies in your everyday life.

IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?

If you decide to participate, I will invite you to

In the first study:

- Participate in two 1-hour semi-structured interviews that will be audio recorded and transcribed
- Complete a short set of activities that will be provided to you over two weeks between interviews (approx. 1-2 hours time required)

In the second study (around 3 months later):

- Attend 2-3 co-design workshops that will take 1-2 hours each. You may choose to attend as many or as few as you would like. The workshops will give involve collaboratively (with other participants) augmenting, re-designing or re-imagining the social technologies you use to improve them and give you the opportunity to envision desired future social technologies. The workshops will be audio recorded and transcribed.

Due to COVID, all activities will be run in a hybrid mode where it is possible to attend in person on the UTS campus or remotely via Zoom.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?

Yes, there are some risks/inconvenience. The interviews involve questions about your experiences using social technologies that may be of a sensitive nature. If you feel distressed during the interview, please let me know immediately and we can cease the interview. Although very unlikely, there may be a risk to the privacy and confidentiality of the data that you provide during this research. The research team will do their best to protect your privacy and confidentiality by de-identifying your data, only using anonymised accounts of your experiences in publications and securely storing your contact details. In the second study you are asked to be involved in group co-design workshops. As part of this you may end up in a group with someone you know or who knows you and who you do not wish to share your experiences of using social platforms as a queer person with. In this event, you will not be required to share anything you do not feel comfortable with and you may opt to attend another session where this is not an issue. If you do not feel comfortable with the idea of working collaboratively with other participants like you, you may not be able to be involved in that study. Finally, there is a risk due to COVID. The researchers will ensure that all face-to-face activities follow a COVID Safe plan and hand sanitiser and masks will be available for you to use. Alternatively, you may choose to attend every activity remotely over Zoom.

ACON www.acon.org.au/what-we-are-here-for/mental-health/#gbti-counselling
 Tewnty10 1800 184 527 or <https://www.twenty10.org.au/get-support/lets-talk/>
 Mental Health Line 1800 011 511

Figure B.2: The second page of the Participant Information Sheet for Study 2.



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
INVESTIGATING HOW THE DESIGN OF SOCIAL TECHNOLOGIES SHAPES THE EXPERIENCES OF
YOUNG QUEER MEN UTS HREC APPROVAL NUMBER: ETH21-5761

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is Tommaso Armstrong and I am a student at UTS. My supervisor is Associate Professor Tuck Wah Leong (TuckWah.Leong@uts.edu.au).

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is seeking to understand how the design of social technologies (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tinder, Grindr, etc.) shapes the experiences of young queer men. It aims to understand the impacts of the current designs of social technologies and to explore how they might be designed to be more support of the experiences of young queer men, and the wider queer community.

WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?

You have been invited to participate in this study because you have expressed interest, identify as a queer (e.g. gay/bisexual) man, are 18-28 and use social technologies in your everyday life.

IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?

If you decide to participate, I will invite you to

In the first study:

- Participate in two 1-hour semi-structured interviews that will be audio recorded and transcribed
- Complete a short set of activities that will be provided to you over two weeks between interviews (approx. 1-2 hours time required)

In the second study (around 3 months later):

- Attend 2-3 co-design workshops that will take 1-2 hours each. You may choose to attend as many or as few as you would like. The workshops will give involve collaboratively (with other participants) augmenting, re-designing or re-imagining the social technologies you use to improve them and give you the opportunity to envision desired future social technologies. The workshops will be audio recorded and transcribed.

Due to COVID, all activities will be run in a hybrid mode where it is possible to attend in person on the UTS campus or remotely via Zoom.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?

Yes, there are some risks/inconvenience. The interviews involve questions about your experiences using social technologies that may be of a sensitive nature. If you feel distressed during the interview, please let me know immediately and we can cease the interview. Although very unlikely, there may be a risk to the privacy and confidentiality of the data that you provide during this research. The research team will do their best to protect your privacy and confidentiality by de-identifying your data, only using anonymised accounts of your experiences in publications and securely storing your contact details. In the second study you are asked to be involved in group co-design workshops. As part of this you may end up in a group with someone you know or who knows you and who you do not wish to share your experiences of using social platforms as a queer person with. In this event, you will not be required to share anything you do not feel comfortable with and you may opt to attend another session where this is not an issue. If you do not feel comfortable with the idea of working collaboratively with other participants like you, you may not be able to be involved in that study. Finally, there is a risk due to COVID. The researchers will ensure that all face-to-face activities follow a COVID Safe plan and hand sanitiser and masks will be available for you to use. Alternatively, you may choose to attend every activity remotely over Zoom.

ACON www.acon.org.au/what-we-are-here-for/mental-health/#gbti-counselling
 Twenty10 1800 184 527 or <https://www.twenty10.org.au/get-support/lets-talk/>
 Mental Health Line 1800 011 511

Figure B.3: The consent form signed by participants before involvement in Study 2.



VERBAL CONSENT SCRIPT

INVESTIGATING HOW THE DESIGN OF SOCIAL TECHNOLOGIES SHAPES THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG QUEER MEN UTS HREC APPROVAL NUMBER: ETH21-5761

Interview no:	
Date:	
Time:	
Interviewer:	

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today about your use of social platforms as a queer man. Some questions might be sensitive so if you are feeling distressed or need to take a break we can stop at any time. The interview will take approximately an hour and so will the follow up interview in 2-3 weeks. If you feel that you would rather not go on with the interviews that is fine too.

[Wait for participant to confirm they are happy to continue, otherwise thank them for their time.]

Thank you. Now I just need to confirm some information about you, and I'm going to start recording. This will help us to accurately record your answers, but all this information will remain completely confidential. Is that OK?

First, I need to ask you some questions to confirm that you consent to participating. Remember, even after you've answered these questions, you can withdraw your consent at any time during the interview.

The consent questions are:

Question	Yes	No
Have you read the information contained in the participant information sheet or had it read to you in a language that you understand?		
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and are you satisfied with the answers you have received?		
Do you understand that there may be risks? The main risk is that you might be asked about something that distresses you, if that happens, please let me know. Although very unlikely, there may be a risk to the privacy and confidentiality of the data that you provide during this research. The research team will do their best to protect your privacy and confidentiality by de-identifying your data, only using anonymised		

Figure B.4: The first page of the verbal consent template used before participant involvement in Study 2 when interviews were conducted over Zoom.

accounts of your experiences in publications and securely storing your contact details. Is this ok?		
Do you understand that the research will produce reports, academic work, articles/blog posts and form part of my PhD?		
Do you freely agree to participate in this activity, with the understanding that you may withdraw at any time?		
Do you agree to having this interview audio recorded and transcribed?		

(If answered NO to any of these – clarify and/or discontinue interview)

If you have any concerns about the research you can talk to me or contact my supervisor, Tuck Wah Leong

If you would like to talk to someone who is not connected with the research, you may contact the Research Ethics Officer on 02 9514 9772 or Research.ethics@uts.edu.au and quote this number **ETH21-5761**

<p><i>If the participant declines to provide verbal consent:</i></p> <p>Interview no. _____ read the verbal consent script (or had it read to them) and agreed to participate on date: _____ time: _____ .</p>
--

Figure B.5: The second page of the verbal consent template used before participant involvement in Study 2 when interviews were conducted over Zoom.

B.2 Recruitment material



Figure B.6: The images used as part of Instagram posts to recruit participants for Study 2.

Appendix C

Study 3

C.1 Co-design workshops

C.1.1 Information and consent documents



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

ETH23-7971 - Investigating how young queer men's use of social technologies shapes their everyday experiences

WHO IS CONDUCTING THIS RESEARCH?

My name is Tommaso Armstrong and I am a student at UTS. My supervisor is Professor Elise van den Hoven (Elise.VandenHoven@uts.edu.au).

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is seeking to understand how the design of social technologies (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tinder, Grindr, etc.) shapes the experiences of young queer men. It aims to understand the impacts of the current designs of social technologies and to explore how they might be designed to be more support of the experiences of young queer men, and the wider queer community.

WHY HAVE I BEEN INVITED?

You have been invited to participate because you work in technology design. You have been invited because you have expressed interest in being involved or because I have found you (and your contact details) through your online presence and think your expertise is appropriate.

Before you decide to participate in this research study, please check the selection criteria:

- You work in technology design
- You are based in or able to travel to attend a workshop in the San Francisco Bay Area
- You identify as queer or are an ally of the queer community

WHAT DOES MY PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

If you decide to participate, I will invite you to participate in a co-design workshop that will take approximately 2-3 hours. During the workshop I will present findings from my research to date and ask you to participate in collaborative activities with other participants. The activities will involve generating ideas and concepts for how to augment, re-design or re-imagine the social technologies used by queer young men (and queer young people more generally). They will also involve group discussion, including of concepts that have been created in previous workshops. The workshops will be audio recorded and transcribed and any artefacts that are produced will be digitised and used as part of the research.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?

Yes, there are some risks/inconvenience.

As part of your involvement in this research, you will be asked to travel to attend a group-based workshop. To lessen the inconvenience of this, the workshop will be held on a weekend and in a location that is easily accessible by public transport.

Figure C.1: The first page of the Participant Information Sheet for the Study 3 workshops.



You might be concerned about whether your contributions will be linked to you and/or your professional practice. Your involvement in this research will be confidential and your contributions will be de-identified. Additionally, this research is not an evaluation of you or your practice, but it is about including your perspective as a professional to enhance understandings of how technology may be designed.

Although very unlikely, there may be a risk to the privacy and confidentiality of the data that you provide during this research. The research team will do their best to protect your privacy and confidentiality by de-identifying your data, presenting your contributions in a way that cannot be identified except with your consent and securely storing your contact details.

Although you will not be asked about your own experiences on social platforms, there is the unlikely chance that the issues explored in the workshop may make you uncomfortable. As this will be a group-based workshop, there is also the possibility that there may be someone else who you do not want to work with or who makes you feel uncomfortable. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, please let me know immediately and you will be able to withdraw from the workshop, sit out any activities or engage in a way that is appropriate for you.

211	211 or https://www.211.org
LGBT National Hotline	+1 (888) 843 4564
Hopeline: San Francisco	+1 (415) 781-0500

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

Participation in this study is voluntary. It is completely up to you whether or not you decide to take part. If you decide not to participate, or to withdraw from the study, it will not affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Technology Sydney.

WHAT IF I WITHDRAW FROM THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

If you wish to withdraw from the study once it has started, you can do so at any time without having to give a reason, by contacting Tommaso Armstrong (Tommaso.Armstrong@student.uts.edu.au). If you withdraw from the study your contact details will be deleted. As the workshop is collaborative in nature, it may not be possible to destroy your contributions without affecting the contributions of other participants, but no further data will be collected from you.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO INFORMATION ABOUT ME?

By signing the consent form you consent to the research team collecting and using personal information about you for the research project. All this information will be treated confidentially. Information will be only accessible to the research team and stored on secure UTS infrastructure. Data collected will be de-identified and your contact details will be stored password-protected separately to other data. We would like to store your information for future use in research projects that are an extension of this research project. In all instances, your information will be treated as confidential and stored securely.

It is anticipated that the results of this research project will be published and/or presented in a variety of forums. In any publication and/or presentation, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified, except with your permission.

Figure C.2: The second page of the Participant Information Sheet for the Study 3 workshops.



In accordance with relevant Australian and/or NSW Privacy laws, you have the right to request access to the information about you that is collected and stored by the research team. You also have the right to request that any information with which you disagree be corrected. Please inform the research team member named at the end of this document if you would like to access your information.

WHAT IF I HAVE ANY QUERIES OR CONCERNS?

If you have queries or concerns about the research that you think I or my supervisor can help you with, please feel free to contact us at Tommaso.Armstrong@student.uts.edu.au or Elise.VandenHoven@uts.edu.au. You can also speak to a local independent contact, David Sparkman on <redacted>.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

NOTE:

This study has been approved in line with the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee [UTS HREC] guidelines. If you have any concerns or complaints about any aspect of the conduct of this research that you wish to raise independently of the research team, please contact the Ethics Secretariat on ph.: +61 2 9514 2478 or email: Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au], and quote the UTS HREC reference number. Any matter raised will be treated confidentially, investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

Figure C.3: The third page of the Participant Information Sheet for the Study 3 workshops.



CONSENT FORM

ETH23-7971 - Investigating how young queer men's use of social technologies shapes their everyday experiences

I _____ agree to participate in the research project being conducted by Tommaso Armstrong, School of Computer Science, Level 7, Building 11, University of Technology Sydney, 81 Broadway, Ultimo, NSW 2007, Australia, +61 _____.

I have read the Participant Information Sheet or someone has read it to me in language that I understand.

I understand the purposes, procedures and risks of the research as described in the Participant Information Sheet.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and I am satisfied with the answers I have received.

I freely agree to participate in this research project as described and understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without affecting my relationship with the researchers or the University of Technology Sydney.

I understand that I will be given a signed copy of this document to keep.

I am aware that I can contact Tommaso Armstrong or David Sparkman if I have any concerns about the research.

Name and Signature [participant]

___/___/___
Date

Name and Signature [researcher or delegate]

___/___/___
Date

Figure C.4: The consent form signed by participants before involvement in Study 3 workshops.

C.1.2 Recruitment material

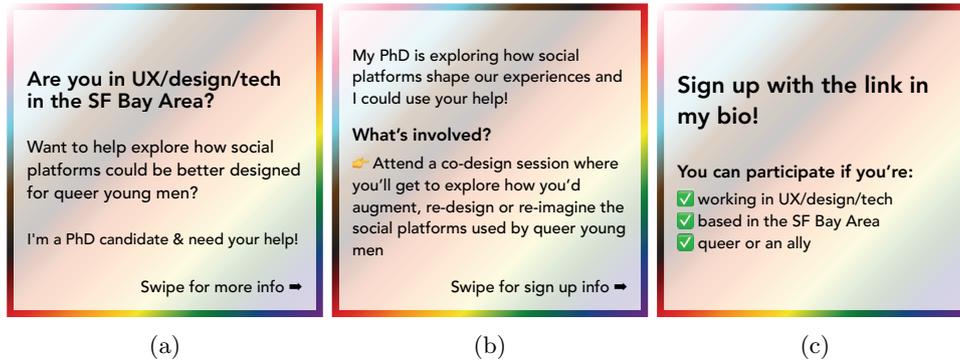


Figure C.5: The images used as part of Instagram posts to recruit participants for the Study 3 workshops.

Want to help explore how the design of social platforms could be better for queer young men?

I'm a PhD candidate researching how social platforms shape our experiences and could use your help!

What's involved?

- 👉 Attend a 2-3 hour co-design workshop
- 👉 You'll get to explore how you'd augment, re-design or re-imagine the social platforms used by queer young men
- 👉 You won't be asked to share any confidential or proprietary information related to your current or former employers

Workshop details:

- 📍 Noisebridge
272 Capp St, San Francisco
- 🕒 Saturday 10 am
Attend either June 17 or July 1

You can participate if you're:

- ✅ working in UX/design/tech
- ✅ based in the SF Bay Area
- ✅ queer or an ally

Sign up here!

For more info see tommaso.so/projects/phd, the [Participant Information Sheet](#) or feel free to email me at tommaso.armstrong@student.uts.edu.au

About the researcher:

Hi 👋, I'm Tommaso and I'm doing my PhD at the University of Technology Sydney. I've been working with queer young men to understand their experiences online. Now I'm exploring how we could design social platforms that are more supportive and enjoyable.



Figure C.6: The flyer used to recruit participants for the Study 3 workshops.

C.1.3 Findings posters

Finding connection with others on dating and hookup apps

Variations in dating app cultures

Platforms were often described as having a specific purpose: Hinge was the most relationship orientated followed by Tinder. Grindr was at the other end of the spectrum although opinion varied on whether it could be used for more than just hookups.

There was often a mismatch between what people wanted and the cultures of the apps: Despite these perceptions, many used the platforms in the hopes of finding other things. For example: friends, more social connections or relationships. Grindr and other dating apps are often the place to go because that's where other queer men are.

“You just don't really expect to make those kinds of connections on Grindr, which is like a huge bonus. Because half the time when I see someone's profile on Grindr, and they're like, oh, looking for friends looking for love, and I'm like, hmmm You're not gonna find that here But it is possible, and maybe I'm just a bit of a pessimist. But, yeah, you do tend to find some, some nice, like, long term, like, friendships and yeah.”

“When I use any dating app It's always with the intention of you know, going on a date and seeing where things go. But honestly, having a friend coming out of that experience is probably better than I expected. Because, like, for me, personally, I don't really have a lot of queer friends... so having, like, another queer friend is honestly fantastic in my mind, like it's probably better than a relationship.”

How direct or upfront people are on apps could be good and bad: Some appreciated how upfront people could be on Grindr, and found that interactions were less performative as a result. Others preferred to chat a bit with new people before deciding whether to take things further.

“It might be weird to say this, but it feels like there's like a it feels genuine, a bit more genuine than like some other things. Like, for instance, like with Tinder, it was like, you're still trying to present an image of yourself, that might be a bit different, rather than just you know, just you're not trying to present as much on Grindr.”

“I guess even though I hate small talk, but you know you got to start somewhere, I guess. And sometimes it is nicer than, you know, straight to the point and, you know, laying out on the table like, what your positions are and yeah, all that shit”

Matching systems improved interactions but could create a barrier to spontaneous connections: Tinder and Hinge's matching system means there has to be some level of mutual interest before each interaction. However, many complained about how they often didn't end up talking with their matches or said it was easier to strike up a conversation on Grindr.

“you can choose who you want to and who not to talk to, like, if you match with them or not. Where as with like Grindr, it's like anyone who's anyone can talk to you. And like that, that's sort of like unsettling feeling. Like, you know, anyone can like want to talk to you and continuously message you like, I don't, I don't like that even in the slightest. So that's why I feel more security on Tinder than on Grindr.”

“Yeah, I think with Tinder, it is a bit more like relationship oriented rather than one offs. I think it's just like, since Grindr is such a it's a lot easier to kind of have that quick and easy interaction. Whereas, with Tinder you kind of have to like you know, swipe them and wait for them to swipe you back it's I just feel like it's a bit too much effort to go to if you're just looking for a hookup”



Negative experiences on dating apps

Things that elsewhere would be described as sexual harassment are commonplace on Grindr: Many received unsolicited and unwanted explicit photos on a regular basis. The inability to send pictures on Tinder meant this wasn't an issue there.

Even if people said what they were looking for in their profiles this was often ignored: There are options on Grindr to say what you're looking for or whether you want to receive NSFW pictures but this was often ignored.

Racism and shaming based on people's bodies was also common on Grindr:

Describing what toxic profiles on Grindr can be like:

“classic like, no fats no fems no Asians or whatever, or just being like, super specific, kind of I'm only into someone that is like six foot or taller and has like broad shoulders and is under 70 kilos and it's just like.”

Dating app metrics could cause anxiety or self doubt and feed insecurities:

“It's hard sometimes to not have that anxiety or that insecurity. I've had times when I've gone out with other gay people and we'll all end up on Grindr. The public comparison of seeing someone's phone filled with messages versus you not getting any, it's that comparison of like, okay, what's wrong with me that I'm not getting the same level of attention?”

“It feels like a game. I think the way that it's designed, the app is designed, it feels like a game. I know a lot of people who would go on Grindr at an event and they're not necessarily there to look for anything or have a hook-up, but will look at their – how many views they get on their profile or how many messages they get. They will take that as – how much attention they get is how much they're worth as a person. If they don't get that validation, yeah, it's quite damaging, I think.”

Strategies for navigating the minefield

Verifying people are who they say they are: Many try to “verify” someone by moving conversations to other platforms like Instagram and Snapchat. There they could either see a more public profile or get the person to send real-time photos to check they weren't being catfished.

“if I'm not sure about someone, I'll be like, okay, like, message me on Instagram. Because that's happened numerous times where like they're just catfishing completely. And also, if... oh I can't really be bothered to pull a bunch of photos from my phone onto Grindr, I'll just be like, just check my Instagram, lower effort.”

Keeping conversations on Grindr until they can trust someone:

Alternatively, some participants tried to keep their accounts on other social platforms separate and would only share them once they'd met someone and decided that they wanted to maintain a connection.

Trying to make sure people can hold a conversation: Some described how they'd suss someone out by making sure they could hold a conversation and would stop talking to people who were too blunt about just wanting to hookup.

Figure C.7: The first findings poster used in the Study 3 co-design workshops.

Creating a safe space to express oneself

Social platforms provided a place for participants to express their queerness by letting them curate audiences for content. Some didn't feel safe or comfortable to be openly queer while others, even if they had widely disclosed their queerness, enjoyed the ability to share more with audiences they were closer with or knew to be more supportive.

Disclosing queerness

Coming out on social platforms can make the process easier: Many used social platforms to broadcast their queerness. Knowing who they had told could become burdensome and making an announcement meant they could tell everyone at once.

“I told my parents in person and told a few other people like in person, but at some point in time, between only being back in (hometown), for like, a weekend or a couple of weeks at a time and then forgetting who I'd told and who I hadn't told and who knew I had Facebook at the time and decided to just like, write one huge post, but that was about it. Mostly because I was sick and tired of like, trying to recall who I'd told. And I was like, I really don't care. Like I just want this over and done with”

Implicitly disclosing queerness: Some participants were comfortable with implicitly disclosing their queerness even if they didn't post about it directly. Other queer people could read between the lines if they wanted to but it wasn't obvious if you weren't looking for it.

“Over time, I got more comfortable like. Yeah, like, for example, there was like something funny that only kind of related to like, gay men or something on Facebook. When I was a lot younger, I would like kind of laugh at it, but then not share it at all whereas over time I kind of felt more comfortable sharing it. So not explicitly coming out, but kind of being more like, comfortable with not hiding my sexuality on the app.”

Being more authentic around other queer people: Multiple participants described how they could be more authentic around other queer people who were more likely to be able to relate or be open to talking or joking about relationships and sex.

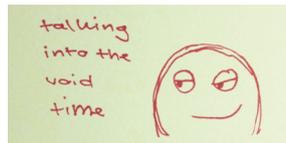
“I think because it very much comes down to because we have had the same experiences. And we have the sort of same viewpoints, we share the same humor then. So when that's why like, I feel more comfortable, like with my queer friends joking about all that kind of stuff, or like joking about sex or joking about relationships.”

Actively curating safe spaces

Being more open on some platforms than others:

“On platforms like Facebook, I don't really post at all. But usually the places where I have like, you know, immediate friends, like it's mainly my friends, and maybe like one or two members of my family who I know are accepting and pro pro LGBT, like, then I'll like post a bit more queer content. But yeah, it's it's just one, it depends on the platform. And two depends on like, who I have like, following or on my friends lists on that platform.”

Using platforms with cultures which encourage less curated content: Snapchat and BeReal were often mentioned as places they could be less concerned about appearances. Both encourage in the moment photos to be shared and were often used only with close friends who participants were happy showing more authentic selves to.



Using alt accounts: Using multiple accounts allowed participants to have both a more public account shared with most people and a more private alt account where they could be less curated in how they presented themselves and more open about their queerness.

On sharing his private Twitter account with only very trusted people:

“I mean, probably, I think a lot of people for the private accounts will be, you know, after a lot of time, I think one or two people that I've shared. Yeah, this is my private Twitter where I put like a lot of personal different things there. It's just under a different name. But it takes like a lot of trust with that. Because yeah, those are my raw opinions.”

Maintaining multiple accounts could be burdensome: While using multiple accounts allowed for more control over audiences, some participants lamented the extra overhead of maintaining multiple accounts.

Limiting followers: Many participants limited who could follow their accounts to protect themselves from harassment or unintentional disclosure of their queerness.

Instagram Close Friends: The Close Friends story on Instagram came up repeatedly as somewhere participants could be more open and expressive of their queerness. Like an alt account, they could control who could see it but it was part of the same account.

“I definitely trust the majority of the people who like follow me on Instagram. But I feel like [Close Friends] is like, just a small net of people who I can trust with a lot of stuff like trust with secrets, trust with my life, pretty much I think that's like, who I include in my friends list. So it's just, I guess it just comes down to trust.”

Some platforms limited control over audience: Many of the social platforms people talked about limit you to making binary choices about who gets to see content. For example Instagram and Twitter let you make your account private or public. They both offer a feature to post some content only to specific people, Close Friends and Circles, but there's only one list that can be used. Many participants expressed a desire for more control over this.

Venting into the void: A number of participants talked about how they used private or anonymous Twitter accounts to vent about what was happening in their life. While others could see their posts, the point was more to put something out there than to share to others

Choosing not to post: Many chose not to actively post but instead communicated with their friends through direct messages or group chats.

Self-censoring was common: Many participants were reluctant to post citing concerns about saying or sharing the wrong thing or about becoming targets of homophobic harassment. Some who's personal accounts had audiences including people from their professional lives also expressed a wariness to upset employers.

Figure C.8: The second findings poster used in the *Study 3* co-design workshops.

Learning about queerness and finding connections to community

Social platforms provided an important way for participants to learn about being queer and where they fit into the community. This was especially the case for those who were from less metropolitan areas or who didn't have queer role models around them.

The benefits of seeing relatable content

Seeing queer relatable content online could make participants feel more comfortable in their queerness:

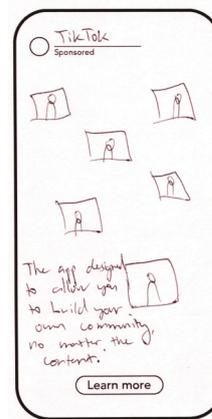
“Mostly just like exposure to exposure, or maybe normalization of just like, stuff like activities, behaviors, whatever that you might not normally be exposed to, or have access to. Just in your day to day life, like for me on TikTok? Like, it's very, very queer. But obviously, in real life, you know, the spaces are mostly it's not like that, right? So it can be good to just like, I don't know, know that there's other people out there, like you or similar”

“I think benefits are, it's a lot easier to realize, realize, slash remind yourself that there are other people that are more similar to you than those you might encounter in your daily life. And also kind of come across a events or activities you might be interested in and also, I guess, connect with people that have gone through similar experiences, but are spatio-temporally not co located.”

Exposure to other queer people and the broader community helped participants figure out where they fit in: Seeing how other queer people presented online helped them see a range of possibilities for how they could express and experience their queerness. Sometimes this was about realising and accepting that the dominant narratives of queerness didn't fit them.

“a lot of the information I get is like about queer history and learning about that also, helps me understand like ok, where we've come from, like how far we've come. And in terms of like, its expression as well, like, learning about different terminology within the queer community, as well as learning about how different people express themselves. Like, I don't wanna say, like, I'm taking like, bits and pieces from them. But it's like observing these people and observing like this information, it makes me understand myself better, and then helps me grow as a person and express myself better.”

Algorithms played a part in suggesting this content: Multiple participants talked about how TikTok's algorithmic feed allowed them to stumble across queer content they might not have



otherwise seen. They also liked that it suggested content more wholesome than what was often presented on Instagram.

Finding community

The platforms provided a way to find community they otherwise didn't have access to:

“I think the benefit – the largest benefit is obviously, connection and community. I think it's really hard for queer people to find connection. I think social media definitely has given me that connection. I think a lot of – I would say probably 90 per cent of my queer friends are people that I've met through social media.”

Particularly beneficial for those outside metro areas: Those from outside metro areas shared how important connection to community on social platforms was due to a lack of visible queer community or support services near them.

Especially important content for those who don't have a network of queer people yet: Being able to connect with other queer people online was particularly important for those who didn't have a network of queer friends offline. As they started to find more community, it became less important.

“I was mainly brought up like many other people in a heterosexual sort of fairytale with people around me and the social networks kind of provided me an escape to actually find out who I am, and connect with other people that were similar.”

Engaging with queer issues/politics

Following and interacting with queer influencers: Some talked about how they'd learned about being queer from posts made by influencers. Sometimes they interacted by asking questions or with others in the comments section and this would make them feel connected to others.

“It could be general support in the form of, again, content creators who are queer or trans specifically, just kind of giving their messages of support to younger trans people or those who are not as far in their transition or it can also be As I mentioned before, the kind of micro connections that you might make, in a comment section of a smaller community, that's an offshoot of one of those creators audiences. And that's sort of more of a mutual support thing, because you can personally exchange like support talking.”

Staying on top of queer issues: Learning about queer issues from posts shared on social platforms was common. Often they'd see posts that their friends or accounts they follow would share to their stories.

“I use it to hear stories, and mostly accounts of events that have taken place, whether it is in Australia or is overseas. I use it to keep up to date with safety concerns, human rights in different countries, and within Australia, such as the bill, they're trying to propose in Victoria for gay conversion therapy to be reopened. I also use it to like, you know, just keep up to date with what's safe, what's not where to be weary? What to look out for.”

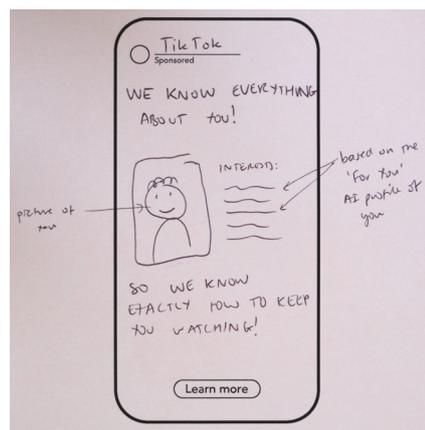


Figure C.9: The third findings poster used in the *Study 3* co-design workshops.

Navigating self-comparison in a community that idolises a certain type of queer man

Participants often spoke of the dominant culture they saw within the queer community of idolising those who showed off perfect bodies and lives, and the negative effects this had.

“Toxic”/idealised content posted on SP

The images most seen on social platforms portray a narrow view of what it means to be a queer man:

On the negative impacts of seeing the “poster child of the gay community”:

“A lot of stuff that does come up on social media that is queer related, is usually the sort of like, poster child of what the gay community is where it’s like, you know a muscle white man, like, you know, flexing, or in a relationship with someone who’s like, basically, they’re, they’re even like, they’re identical twins pretty much like that sort of image, it’s sort of, like it negates, like the rest of the community, it’s just sort of like, okay, this is what everyone should look like. But that’s not the representation of what the queer community is, it’s so much more colorful, it’s so much more diverse. And I think having that imagery constantly shown, it makes a lot of people feel bad about themselves in terms of their appearance, in terms of like, you know, like, how they interact with other people, and then it does affect how to interact with other people. And I think just having that same sort of image all the time, it’s just not good for anyone.”

Negative self-comparison to the ideal lives seen online was common:

“I think that’s more reflecting about like, body image stuff and struggles I’ve just kind of had where if you, it’s less of an issue now, but previously, where you just see photos of people out and about and living their life and stuff like that, and kind of, you know, looking the way I would like to look to a certain extent, kind of can be a bit of a weight on my mind at times”

“Toxic” content could be engaging and algorithms played into it: While most participants described the negative impacts of seeing “toxic” content, many also admitted that it was engaging. The algorithms that suggest content often capitalised on this and presented lots of it to users. The Instagram explore page was brought up repeatedly as an example.

Dating apps were another space that fed into participants’ insecurities: Many described how seeing others receiving more attention on dating apps or people leaving them on read or ghosting made them feel inadequate.

“Yeah, I definitely think it’s absolutely something that’s affected me and something that I’ve experienced. It’s hard sometimes to not have that anxiety or that insecurity. I’ve had times when I’ve gone out with other gay people and we’ll all end up on Grindr. The



public comparison of seeing someone’s phone filled with messages versus you not getting any, it’s that comparison of like, okay, what’s wrong with me that I’m not getting the same level of attention? So yeah, I think that’s a huge part of that culture.”

“I just deleted the app because it was about looks. Really, mainly, I just like, I’m confident in my looks but just like the people who like, leave you on a read or like, look at your profile, you could be like, oh this person looked at my profile and Like didn’t message me, am I not good enough, is there something wrong with me. It’s just like, that kind of thought process. Like goes through your head and goes through your head. And eventually, you’re just like, Screw it. And not screw it but Like, it’s kind of like just makes you feel worse each time. And then like, it goes on and goes on. And it’s like, you don’t want to feel that way. So what’s the point of keeping an app?”

Overcoming this culture

Multiple participants described how they were able to overcome the negative impacts on their self-esteem.

Becoming more comfortable sharing more authentic sides of themselves:

“I guess you’re only going to get used to something, the more you’re exposed to it. So if you’re just feeding yourself, like all these filtered photos that people have on Snapchat, Instagram, and Tiktok is a huge one. Like you know, people put up these videos and they instantly get sad because they don’t look like this filtered version of themselves. And if you’re continuously feeding yourself that, then you’re going to get more and more and more and more upset with how you actually look. Whereas Flipside if you kind of you know embrace and accept and make light of you know, a bad angle of yourself or or funny candid moments I think you’re going to appreciate and be more grateful not take for granted what you actually have”

Maintaining perspective when seeing idealised content:

“If I went on Instagram stories, I would like say, I actively follow like 150 people, the same 20 people will be posting stories. And if I’m not like conscious of that, I see these same 20 people posting stuff all the time, I think that my life is like, incredibly boring. When in reality, it’s probably not. And you know, there’s another 130 people that aren’t posting stuff either. So either we’re all super boring, or you know, these people just post more, or something like that. And so when I’ve got that in mind, I’m usually fine.”

Removing or hiding toxic content: Some shared how they’d flagged content on the platform so they were shown less of it or unfollowed accounts of influencers. Participants reported this as being helpful but some also said it made their experiences on the platforms boring.

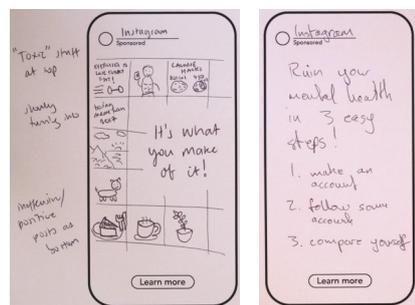


Figure C.10: The fourth findings poster used in the *Study 3* co-design workshops.

Sharing and engaging with explicit content

Many participants described how they shared and engaged with explicit content, whether with people from dating apps or publicly.

Sharing explicit content publicly

Posting NSFW content was commonly motivated by feeling good about oneself or wanting to get validation:

“And I guess it's just like, in the moment when I'm feeling myself, and I just feel the need I just, I just feel I want to share that with everyone else.... And it's not really you know, waiting to see like, what, you know, what's going to come of it? Who's going to respond? It's just like, it's up there. Enjoy. Gonna disappear in 24 hours.”

“I do feel quite proud of the way I look sometimes. I want to celebrate that and show people that I am happy about how I look. Honestly, that's something that I find attractive as well as when someone knows that they are attractive and they are not afraid to show that... I feel like a lot of my sense of self-worth actually comes from that Twitter and the large following that I have amassed which I - like I said earlier, I never expected it to get to that level...”

Trying to keep more explicit content separate: Those who did share explicit content on public Twitter or Instagram accounts talked about how they tried to keep it separate from their main accounts by using alt accounts. While Instagram offers a close friends function, most opted to make an alt account because it gave them more freedom.

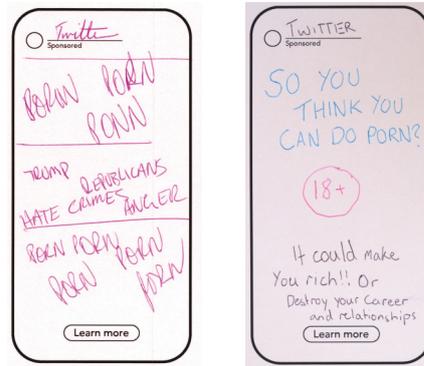
Having separate accounts for NSFW means that people can opt in/out: Some participants described using (or seeing people use) Instagram Close Friends for NSFW content but commented that there's no way to opt out of seeing it which can be problematic.

“Um, I just didn't want to necessarily do the, like, choosing of who gets to see it myself. Like if other people become aware of it and things like that. It was kind of like, I didn't really care if people I don't know, look at it. And I also don't want to, like, necessarily inflict upon my friends things that they may not want to see stuff like that.”

It was common to have friends follow NSFW accounts or exchange nudes: Perhaps something unique to queer people was how many participants didn't make clear distinctions between friends and romantic or sexual partners.

Alt accounts weren't just shared in a sexual way: Some participants described how they had friends who followed their more NSFW accounts even if there wasn't a sexual relationship between them.

“Well, (friend) is a cis girl anyway, but um, yeah... I have a lot of kind of connections like friendship connections, like on my not safe work accounts that aren't sexual at all, but just like, very, like supportive friendships, I guess.”



Linking to NSFW accounts from dating apps: Some participants linked to their NSFW accounts on their dating app profiles so that they could be seen by those they were interested in.

“It's something I feel proud of and I want to put there. Because I understand that Grindr can be a sexual space and sometimes, for me, it is and I do have hook-ups that have been organised through Grindr. I feel like the Twitter is kind of helpful for that. It also means that I don't have to go through the effort of sending people nudes.”

Maintaining privacy & safety

Sharing explicit images on dating apps can require building trust in the recipient:

“Usually, if I'm asked to send something first, it starts off with something that's not compromising but is still - it still leads to that building of trust of like, I'll send this and then you'll send something back. But if I send this and you screenshot it, I'm not going to be super upset, because it's probably something I would post on Instagram.”

Uncertainty about how having posted or shared NSFW content will affect them in the future: Some expressed uncertainty about whether having public NSFW content would have a negative impact down the line.

“Yeah. I think that like, just like posting something I'm like hmmm, but also like, you know, I scroll through the hundreds and hundreds of accounts that like I see on a daily. And I just think like, well, everyone else is doing it. If I'm gonna get bitten in the ass one day, I'm sure there's gonna be plenty of other people. And like I don't like I say this, like, oh, I don't really care if it like, yeah, you know, could definitely affect my career choices in the future, potentially. But it's nothing that like that crazy that you know, in my mind. But, yeah, I don't know it'd be still better than getting like my bank account hacked into which, you know, people getting hacked into on a daily these days.”

Algorithms that suggest content or accounts to follow can be problematic:

“I think when I first opened it up years ago, my my (work) manager somehow ended up following the account. So that was like the epiphany moment I was like, oh shit, I need to I have control over like who sees this account? And yeah, because you don't realize you know, when you're scrolling and you'll you'll have things like pop up like suggested follow like just follow this account and I'm like I didn't consider this would be popping up on people I know on their suggested, I'm like yeah shit, I need to constrict that”

Pressure to sext on dating apps to keep people interested: Many described pressure to share explicit images and how people would often stop engaging with them if they weren't willing to send them.

“It's one of those things that has become a part of the culture that if you don't participate, you won't get anything or won't be interacted with. I think it is a hard thing.”

Receiving unsolicited nudes was common: Many described receiving unsolicited nudes on dating apps but this also played out on other platforms. Multiple participants talked about Snapchat as another place where people would send them.



Figure C.11: The fifth findings poster used in the *Study 3* co-design workshops.

C.1.4 Concept sheet

<p>Concept sheet</p>		<p>How does it work?</p>
<p>Group member names</p>		
<p>Name of the concept/one sentence summary</p>		
<p>Why explore this concept?</p>		
<p>Area to sketch/visualise/mindmap the concept</p>		
<p>What's new/different/the same compared to existing platforms?</p>	<p>Why is this concept desirable?</p>	<p>What barriers could there be to implementing this?</p>
<p>Redesign ----- New concept</p>	<p>A little desirable ----- Extremely desirable</p>	<p>Realistic ----- Blue sky</p>

Figure C.12: The concept sheet used in the *Study 3* co-design workshops.

C.2 Evaluation sessions

C.2.1 Information and consent documents



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
INVESTIGATING HOW THE DESIGN OF SOCIAL TECHNOLOGIES SHAPES THE EXPERIENCES OF
YOUNG QUEER MEN UTS HREC APPROVAL NUMBER: ETH21-5761

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is Tommaso Armstrong and I am a student at UTS. My supervisors are Professor Elise van den Hoven and Professor Simon Buckingham Shum.

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is seeking to understand how the design of social technologies (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tinder, Grindr, etc.) shapes the experiences of young queer men. It aims to understand the impacts of the current designs of social technologies and to explore how they might be designed to be more supportive of the experiences of young queer men, and the wider queer community.

WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?

You have been invited to participate in this study because you have expressed interest, identify as a queer (e.g. gay/bisexual) man, are 18-28 and use social technologies in your everyday life.

IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?

If you decide to participate, I will invite you to attend a co-design workshop that will take approximately 2 hours. The workshop will involve collaboratively (with other participants) exploring and providing feedback on proposed new concepts for social platforms. The workshops will be audio recorded and transcribed.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?

Yes, there are some risks/inconvenience. Although very unlikely, there may be a risk to the privacy and confidentiality of the data that you provide during this research. The research team will do their best to protect your privacy and confidentiality by de-identifying your data, only using anonymised accounts of your experiences in publications and securely storing your contact details. As part of the group co-design workshop you may end up in a group with someone you know or who knows you and who you do not wish to share your experiences of using social platforms as a queer person with. In this event, you will not be required to share anything you do not feel comfortable with and you may opt to attend another session where this is not an issue. If you do not feel comfortable with the idea of working collaboratively with other participants like you, you may not be able to be involved in that study. Finally, there is a risk due to COVID. The researchers will ensure that all face-to-face activities follow a COVID Safe plan and hand sanitiser and masks will be available for you to use.

ACON	www.acon.org.au/what-we-are-here-for/mental-health/#gbti-counselling
Tewnty10	1800 184 527 or https://www.twenty10.org.au/get-support/lets-talk/
Mental Health Line	1800 011 511
Lifeline	13 11 14 or online at lifeline.org.au

DO I HAVE TO SAY YES?

Participation in this study is voluntary. It is completely up to you whether or not you decide to take part.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I SAY NO?

If you decide not to participate, it will not affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Technology Sydney. If you wish to withdraw from the study once it has started, you can do so at any time without having to give a reason, by contacting Tommaso Armstrong (Tommaso.Armstrong@student.uts.edu.au).

If you withdraw from the research, data we have collected during your involvement will be destroyed and not used.

Figure C.13: The first page of the Participant Information Sheet for the Study 3 evaluation sessions.



You might be concerned about whether your contributions will be linked to you and/or your professional practice. Your involvement in this research will be confidential and your contributions will be de-identified. Additionally, this research is not an evaluation of you or your practice, but it is about including your perspective as a professional to enhance understandings of how technology may be designed.

Although very unlikely, there may be a risk to the privacy and confidentiality of the data that you provide during this research. The research team will do their best to protect your privacy and confidentiality by de-identifying your data, presenting your contributions in a way that cannot be identified except with your consent and securely storing your contact details.

Although you will not be asked about your own experiences on social platforms, there is the unlikely chance that the issues explored in the workshop may make you uncomfortable. As this will be a group-based workshop, there is also the possibility that there may be someone else who you do not want to work with or who makes you feel uncomfortable. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, please let me know immediately and you will be able to withdraw from the workshop, sit out any activities or engage in a way that is appropriate for you.

211	211 or https://www.211.org
LGBT National Hotline	+1 (888) 843 4564
Hopeline: San Francisco	+1 (415) 781-0500

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

Participation in this study is voluntary. It is completely up to you whether or not you decide to take part. If you decide not to participate, or to withdraw from the study, it will not affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Technology Sydney.

WHAT IF I WITHDRAW FROM THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

If you wish to withdraw from the study once it has started, you can do so at any time without having to give a reason, by contacting Tommaso Armstrong (Tommaso.Armstrong@student.uts.edu.au). If you withdraw from the study your contact details will be deleted. As the workshop is collaborative in nature, it may not be possible to destroy your contributions without affecting the contributions of other participants, but no further data will be collected from you.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO INFORMATION ABOUT ME?

By signing the consent form you consent to the research team collecting and using personal information about you for the research project. All this information will be treated confidentially. Information will be only accessible to the research team and stored on secure UTS infrastructure. Data collected will be de-identified and your contact details will be stored password-protected separately to other data. We would like to store your information for future use in research projects that are an extension of this research project. In all instances, your information will be treated as confidential and stored securely.

It is anticipated that the results of this research project will be published and/or presented in a variety of forums. In any publication and/or presentation, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified, except with your permission.

Figure C.14: The second page of the Participant Information Sheet for the Study 3 evaluation sessions.



CONSENT FORM
INVESTIGATING HOW THE DESIGN OF SOCIAL TECHNOLOGIES SHAPES THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG QUEER MEN UTS HREC APPROVAL NUMBER: ETH21-5761

I _____ agree to participate in the research project "Investigating how the design of social technologies shapes the experiences of young queer men" being conducted by Tommaso Armstrong, School of Computer Science, Level 7, Building 11, University of Technology Sydney, 81 Broadway, Ultimo, NSW 2007.

I have read the Participant Information Sheet or someone has read it to me in a language that I understand.

I understand the purposes, procedures and risks of the research as described in the Participant Information Sheet.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and I am satisfied with the answers I have received.

I freely agree to participate in this research project as described and understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without affecting my relationship with the researchers or the University of Technology Sydney.

I understand that I will be given a signed copy of this document to keep.

I agree to be:

Audio recorded

I agree that the research data gathered from this project may be published in a form that:

Does not identify me in any way

May be used for future research purposes

I am aware that I can contact Tommaso Armstrong if I have any concerns about the research.

Name and Signature [participant]

____/____/____
Date

Name and Signature [researcher or delegate]

____/____/____
Date

Figure C.15: The consent form signed by participants before involvement in Study 3 evaluation sessions.

C.2.2 Recruitment material

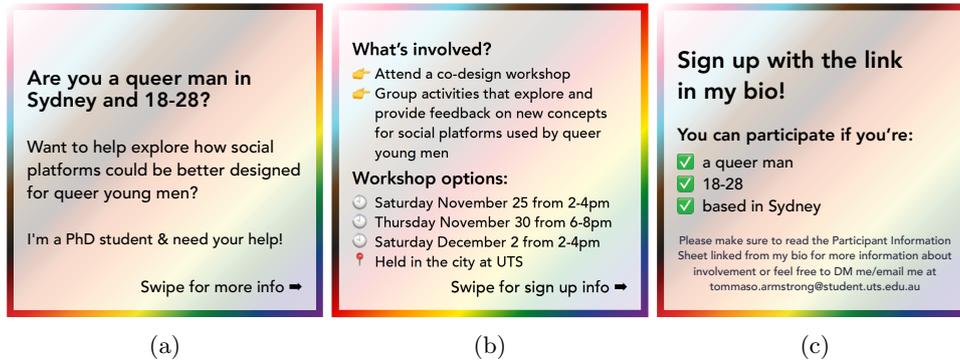


Figure C.16: The images used as part of Instagram posts to recruit participants for the Study 3 evaluation sessions.

C.2.3 Worksheets

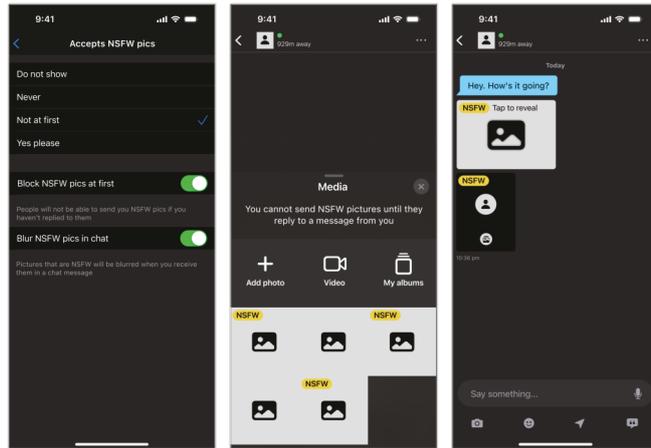
Concepts that block unwanted messages

Names: _____

Some apps get you to match with others before they can message. On apps like Grindr, anyone can message. While this has positives, receiving unwanted messages, especially unsolicited nudes, is a common problem. These concepts offer more control over how people can message you.

New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics

Some people are happy to receive NSFW pics in the first message while others don't want to see them immediately or never do. At the moment, some apps allow you to specify on your profile whether you accept NSFW pics but that isn't enforced. This concept gives more control over blocking or blurring NSFW pics.



How desirable is this?
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Why do you think that?

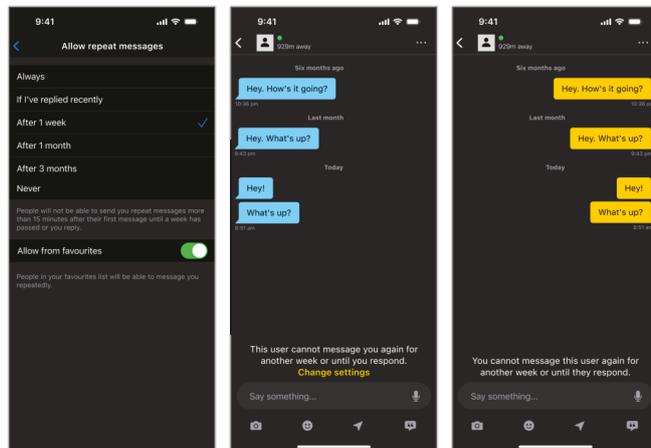
Improvements you'd make:

If enabled, people will be blocked from sending NSFW pics at first.

If enabled, NSFW pics will be blurred until you tap to open them.

Block repeated messages

This new concept would allow you to limit how often people can message you by default. There's an option to allow repeat messages from people in your favourites.



How desirable is this?
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Why do you think that?

Improvements you'd make:

New options for blocking repeated messages. People will have a fifteen minute window to send messages before it becomes a repeat message.

If enabled, people will be blocked from sending repeat messages.

A notice is displayed when they are blocked from sending new messages.

Figure C.17: The first of the mockup worksheets used in the *Study 3* evaluation sessions.

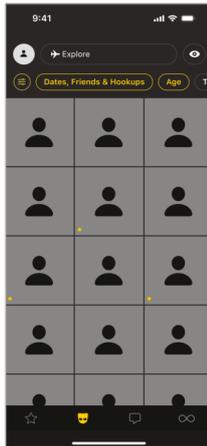
Concepts that help align expectations

Names: _____

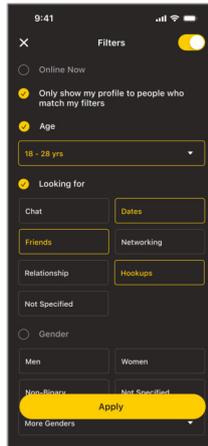
Dating apps are particularly important places of connection for queer young men. However, mismatched expectations can be a big issue and many face abuse or harassment. These concepts offer ways to better align expectations.

Providing more control over who can find and message you

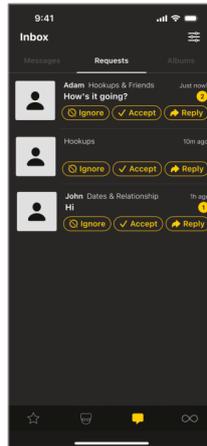
People use dating apps for a variety of reasons and this can sometimes lead to mismatched expectations. What someone is looking for can often vary as well. This concept changes Looking For from a static profile field and makes it a filter so that it's easier to change based on what you're after each time you use the app. It also allows the option for filters to be bi-directional so you can filter who sees you as well as who you see. Finally, it shows messages from people you haven't interacted with in a separate tab from where you can decide whether to interact.



What you're looking for is highlighted at the top of your filters.



Option to limit who can see you to those within your filters. Looking for is more prominent.



Messages from people you haven't interacted with before appear in a new requests tab.

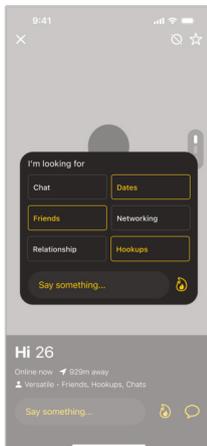
How desirable is this?
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Why do you think that?

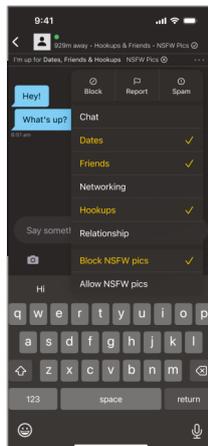
Improvements you'd make:

Signalling what you're looking for

What you're looking for can vary depending on who you're talking to so this concept allows you to tailor what appears in your looking for. When you message or tap someone for the first time, you're prompted to say what you're looking for. In the chat window you can now see both your own and their Looking For and NSFW pic preferences so expectations are clearer.



Signal what you're looking for when you message/tap someone. This defaults to your current Looking For but can be customised.



In the chat window, both you and their expectations for Looking For and NSFW are shown. You can change yours at any time.

How desirable is this?
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Why do you think that?

Improvements you'd make:

Figure C.18: The second of the mockup worksheets used in the *Study 3* evaluation sessions.

Concepts that help people use dating apps

Names: _____

Sometimes dating apps can be overwhelming, especially when first joining and you're unsure who to ask for help getting started. People also have different expectations of how to behave on the apps. The concept below explores how a chat bot could help address these issues.

Grindr Bot

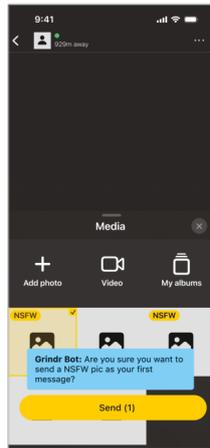
This concept explores what a dating app chat bot could look like. When users first install the app, it helps onboard them and they can also ask it questions if they have them. Finally, it could prompt users when it thinks they're going to do something that might not be respectful of others.



When users sign up, Grindr Bot welcomes them to the app and makes sure people are aware of the Community Guidelines.



You can ask Grindr Bot questions, for example if you don't understand something.



Grindr Bot prompts people when they're about to do something that might not be respectful.

How desirable is this?
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Why do you think that?

Improvements you'd make:

Figure C.19: The third of the mockup worksheets used in the *Study 3* evaluation sessions.

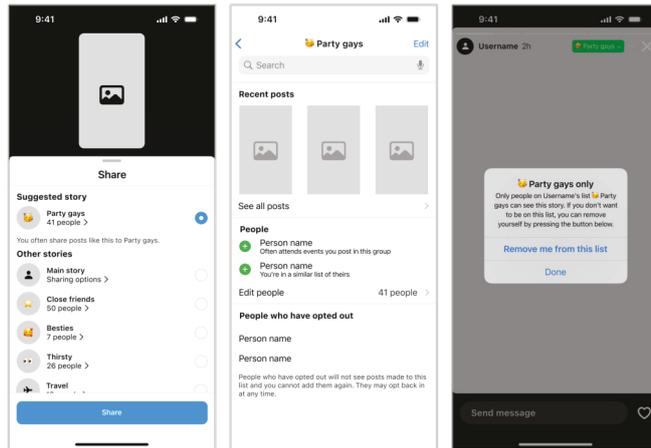
Concepts for improving agency over what you see and share

Names: _____

These concepts give you more agency over the content you see and the audiences for content that you share.

Smart social circles

Many social apps have ways to filter the audience of posts you make. Instagram has Close friends and X (formerly Twitter) has Circles. These only allow for one list though which can be problematic. This concept allows you to create multiple lists and uses AI to suggest lists when posting and people to include in them. This example shows stories but this could also be an option when making posts.



How desirable is this?
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Why do you think that?

Improvements you'd make:

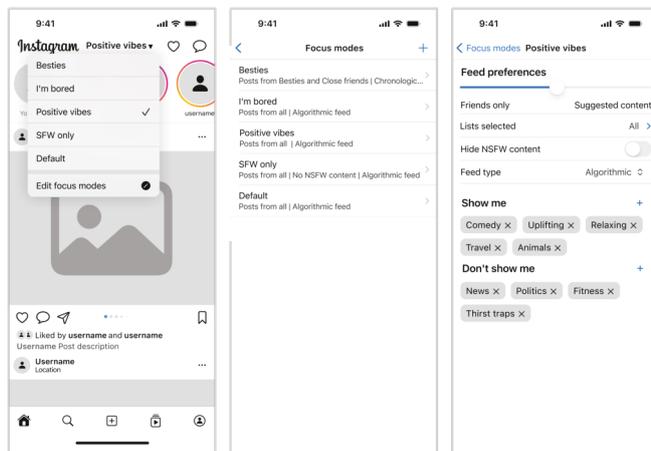
When posting a story, a suggestion is made for which list to share it to. Your other lists are shown below.

The edit list interface. You can see recent posts, get suggestions for who to add and see who has opted out.

When viewing a story shared to a private list, you can see the name of the list as well as opt out of it.

Focus modes for content feeds

At the moment many apps offer an algorithmic feed or a chronological one. While there are options to filter out content from algorithmic feeds, there isn't much control over what you see in the moment. This concept allows you create customisable focus modes over the content that gets presented to you. You can choose how much content is from friends or suggested, allow or block NSFW content, set the feed type to chronological or algorithmic as well as set what kinds of content you do or don't want to see.



How desirable is this?
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Why do you think that?

Improvements you'd make:

You can select a focus mode to change what the algorithm presents you.

You can create focus modes that suit different moods or contexts.

Each mode is customisable.

Figure C.20: The fourth of the mockup worksheets used in the *Study 3* evaluation sessions.

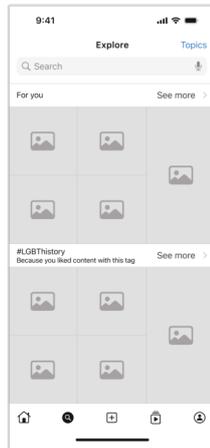
Concepts for finding connection to community

Names: _____

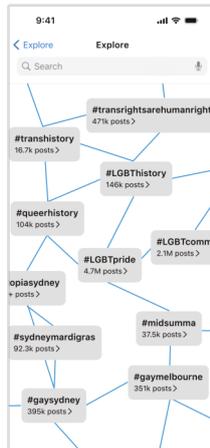
One of the many positives participants talked about was how social platforms allowed them to connect to others in the LGBTQ+ community. These concepts try to support this.

Suggested topics

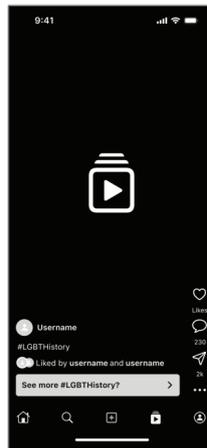
Many participants learned about being LGBTQ+ from content they found online. This concept would make it easier to explore topics related to the content you see. This example shows how it could help uncover LGBT history content but this could happen for any kind of content and provide a way to more actively explore communities.



The Explore page shows suggested topics.



You can explore topics in a new network view.



Suggested topics are highlighted on related content to encourage you to explore more.

How desirable is this?
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Why do you think that?

Improvements you'd make:

Local Guide

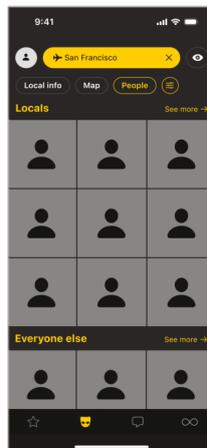
Maybe you're in a new city or you just want to get more involved in the local LGBTQ+ community where you are. This concept showcases a new Explore feature for Grindr that lets you find out about LGBTQ+ events, places and support services. It also helps you find people who are local or perhaps just passing through.



The local info page gives information about a city, LGBTQ+ events that are on and community support services.



The map page shows a map of LGBTQ+ places you can explore.



The people page lets you find people based on whether they're local or not. Maybe you want to find someone who knows the city well, or a fellow traveller to explore with.

How desirable is this?
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Why do you think that?

Improvements you'd make:

Figure C.21: The fifth of the mockup worksheets used in the *Study 3* evaluation sessions.

C.3 Distress protocol

Distress protocol

Interviews

If participants become visibly distressed or indicate that they are:

- The interviewer will suggest that it's appropriate for the interview to be terminated.
- If the participant wishes this to happen the interview will be ceased.
- The interviewer will encourage the participant to contact their GP, mental health provider or one of the services identified on the Participant Information Sheet
- The interviewer will provide a follow up after the interview to check on them and determine the feasibility of a follow-up interview (if they consent)
- The interviewer will encourage the participant to contact them if they experience further distress following the interview.

Co-design sessions

If participants become visibly distressed or indicate that they are:

- A facilitator will ask if the participant would like to step outside to remove themselves from the distressing situation.
- If the participant would like to do that, a facilitator will go with them to make sure they are ok.
- The facilitator will encourage the participant to contact their GP, mental health provider or one of the services identified on the Participant Information Sheet
- A facilitator will provide a follow up after the session to check on them and determine whether they would like to join another session (if they consent)
- A facilitator will encourage the participant to contact them if they experience further distress following the session.

If there are disagreements between participants:

- If it is due to disagreements over ideas of how to do the activities or about their opinions related to them: a facilitator will try to defuse the disagreement, tell the participants that there are no right answers and encourage them to accept their differences and continue.
- If this does not solve the issues, the facilitator may try to separate the participants that are having a disagreement and if they are distressed, follow the distress protocol above.
- If the situation becomes heated or someone is disrespectful of other participants, they may be asked to leave.

Figure C.22: The distress protocol.

Appendix D

Papers published based on
the work in this thesis

D.1 SNS and the Lived Experiences of Queer Youth (Armstrong & Leong, 2019)

SNS and the Lived Experiences of Queer Youth

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ABSTRACT

Technology design has not adequately included a queer perspective, even though digital technologies such as social networking sites (SNS) have been shown to play vital roles in the lives and well-being of queer people. SNS provide queer people with a means to explore their identities, learn about queerness and connect to others with similar experiences. However, SNS use can also have detrimental effects, exposing queer people to harm and victimisation. To date, there is not much effort in HCI to understand the experiences of queer people with SNS. As a result, we lack understanding of how SNS and other social technologies could be designed in ways that are supportive of queer people's well-being. The findings from this exploratory study reveal how particular digital technologies can have complex effects in shaping queer people's experiences and their well-being.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**;
• **Social and professional topics** → **Sexual orientation**.

KEYWORDS

queer, LGBTQIA+, lived experiences, SNS

ACM Reference Format:

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1 INTRODUCTION

This paper presents experiences of queer people and how the use of social networking sites (SNS) can shape their experiences. Following [10], our use of "queer" refers to, "anyone who does not identify as exclusively heterosexual (including gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, transgender, genderqueer, questioning, and others)". Like [10, 14], we explore the experiences of queer youth between the ages of 18–28, a demographic that grew up with SNS during the formative years of their identity development as queer. This research is important to HCI because to date, there's been little effort to understand how technology use shapes the experiences

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<https://doi.org/10.1145/3369457.3369497>

of the queer people. Despite queer people making up 5–10% of the population [21], a search of the ACM Digital Library on July 29, 2019, for keywords or paper titles that engage with queer people or queer theory, revealed only 103 results out of 2,800,000+ records. There were 70% more results that pertained to the fact that an author's name was "Gay". Thus, we argue that queer people are not only marginalised in society but also within HCI, where the focus and efforts are overwhelming heteronormative.

The need to include queer perspectives in HCI has been championed by a few researchers who have called for efforts to be more inclusive of diverse experiences and perspectives. [12] argues that conservatism and technocentrism within HCI threaten to reinforce problematic status quos through a desire to be apolitical or ahistorical. Similarly, [1] warns of the dangers of universalist design which, "demotes cultural, social, regional, and national differences in user experiences and outlooks" and argues that more pluralist design which accounts for the complexity of human experience will likely provide more human-centred outcomes.

Our literature review found that research around the queer community to date has primarily focused on their use of specific technology, e.g. Grindr, a dating app, and particular sub-groups, e.g. gay men. However, SNS are not used in isolation and the focus on particular sub-groups has left others underrepresented. Thus, our exploratory study takes a broader interest in exploring holistically how use of SNS plays a role in shaping the experiences and sense of well-being of a diverse group of queer people.

2 RELATED WORK

There has been a growing interest to understand better how digital technologies, particularly SNS, can affect well-being. Research within HCI and psychology has shown how SNS, like a double-edged sword, can have both positive and negative effects depending on how they are used [3, 7, 8, 23]. While there are clear benefits afforded by SNS use, the way SNS negatively impacts people's well-being is only just starting to be understood.

While research shows how adverse mental health outcomes can arise from SNS usage [3, 7, 9, 23], we argue that these adverse outcomes may be heightened for queer people. This is due to the additional burden of minority stress faced by queer people. Minority stress is brought about by the stigmatisation of their identities, arising from a range of sources, including homophobic environments, victimisation, learned expectations of rejection and the psychological burden of concealing one's identity [15, 18].

Research shows that SNS use by queer people can lead to this minority stress, with them potentially experiencing victimisation, discrimination, or being inadvertently outed [6, 11, 14, 19]. For example, queer youth are 2–3x more likely to be the targets of cyber-bullying [14]. [6] argue that while queer people can benefit

Figure D.1: Page 1 of Armstrong and Leong (2019)

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Tommaso Armstrong and Tuck Wah Leong

from feeling safe enough to be visibly queer online, SNS don't afford enough control over "selective visibility" which might allow only certain trusted friends to see queer aspects of one's identity. Similarly, the convergence, particularly on Facebook, of connections from multiple contexts which often mirror real-life networks, can lead to problematic and unintended disclosure or outing as a result of context collapse, described as the "flatten[ing of] multiple audiences into one" [13]. While some SNS, including Facebook, allow the option to restrict the visibility of specific posts, interacting with content on the site often creates traces over which there are minimal privacy controls. For example, RSVPing to a queer event might automatically create a post which announces this interaction to one's entire Facebook network [6]. Even when the individual is not the direct target of harm, they may experience adverse effects, for example, in situations where one bears witness to anti-queer discourse or abuse aimed at others [19]. Harassment from outsiders is not the only issue, though. Research concerning trans safe spaces found that harm is often perpetuated by people in one's social circles in what the authors refer to as "lateral violence" or "insider harm" [19].

On the other hand, SNS have been shown to support queer people by allowing for social support and learning. [10] show that queer youth benefit significantly from the social support that SNS can afford them. This social support, often from peers or role-models, enables them to feel less isolated and provides a way to explore and learn how to enact their identities with others. This is particularly beneficial because queer people have to make sense of and allow for the emergence of their identities in a way that cis-gender heterosexuals (cis-hets) do not [10]. Furthermore, social support can act as a protective factor against minority stress [18], contributing positively to well-being. These interactions are particularly vital when individuals don't have existing relationships with supportive figures or peers [14], especially for those with identities that are less represented in society (e.g. asexual or transgender) [10].

Anonymity and privacy within online queer spaces is a significant priority when there is such a high propensity for harm. The anonymity afforded by the internet has made it an essential tool for queer individuals to connect with other queer people [19]. Historically, congregating in physical spaces has caused safety concerns for queer people. As a result, much social activity has now shifted online [22]. Feelings of anonymity are also crucial in the early stages of developing one's identity due to the commonly experienced fear of stigmatisation if one were to be discovered [10]. The importance of anonymity can be seen in research about the queer community on Tumblr. [4] notes how the anonymity afforded by the site enables greater honesty and gives queer users a space to experiment with their identity. In addition, anonymity affords users the ability to have less specific or static representations of their identity. This is particularly supportive of gender-diverse individuals who may have emergent or fluid gender identities [5, 11].

A range of dating apps, which we include in the scope of SNS, are increasingly becoming a popular space for queer people to interact. However, our review of the literature shows that Grindr, a location-based dating application for queer men, is the main app to have received attention from researchers [2, 17, 22]. While Grindr is often perceived as a place to find casual sex, many people use it in the hopes of finding social connections or romantic relations

Table 1: Participant details

Participant #	Age	Queer Identity
1	22	Bisexual & transgender
2	23	Gay
3	26	Gay
4	18	Bisexual, possibly non-binary trans
5	19	Bisexual/queer
6	24	Gay
7	28	Gay
8	25	Queer, bisexual, pansexual
9	18	Transgender

[22]. Researchers have noted, especially amongst gay men, how dating apps are increasingly replacing offline queer spaces such as bars due to the convenience and anonymity they afford when seeking connection to others [17]. Alluded to by [22], apps such as Grindr can also be places where lateral violence can prosper through harassment and abuse perpetrated by others on the platform.

While some within HCI have explored the experiences of queer people, the SIG on Queer(ing) HCI in 2019 [20] has identified several gaps in the literature. Empirical work has focused predominantly on dating and disclosure contexts — a small part of the queer experience. Additionally, the subjects of studies have disproportionately been cis-gay men. Another limitation identified in technology-related queer research is the focus placed on information seeking uses or sexual health over the more social contexts of online spaces [10, 14, 22]. Furthermore, many studies focus on a single technology or SNS, such as Facebook (e.g. [14]) and Grindr (e.g. [22]), when in actuality, queer people often use a combination of technologies.

3 METHOD

3.1 Participants

We recruited participants through social media posts on Facebook and Twitter shared publicly, as well as in secret Facebook groups of Queer Collectives at local universities. We directed respondents to a survey that collected data regarding their sexual and gender identity as well as age. In collecting this data, we aimed to ensure a broad cross-section of queer identities among participants. We also collected contact details so that we could contact them if they met the selection criteria. We should note that the survey was itself a target of homophobic harassment in the form of fake responses with offensive language. It highlighted to us, the level of homophobia that is present in daily life. A summary of participants is presented in Table 1.

3.2 Unstructured Interviews

The exploratory nature of this study meant that we chose unstructured interviews to learn about our participants' experiences. Topics of the interview included participants' identity/queerness, cultural/religious background, familial and social relationships, use of technology and attitudes towards it (particularly social platforms), well-being and work/financial situation. The first author

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conducted the interviews and used his queerness to position himself as an insider to build rapport with participants and make them feel comfortable. The interviews were transcribed from recordings and analysed using thematic analysis [16] leading to the development of themes, which will we will describe in the next section.

4 FINDINGS

The following section presents a subset of themes that emerged in the analysis of the interview data. Collectively, they reveal the lived experiences of queerness and the different ways technology shape queer experiences. The themes are presented in an order that reflects the chronology of participants' journeys from self-discovery and acceptance, to living in the closet, coming out and life beyond. While they follow a typical journey based on experiences gathered, we note that these stages may overlap, be experienced in a different order or not at all.

4.1 Technologies for Self-Discovery

All participants had a moment of realisation that they were queer. This was either by realising that not everyone had the same non-heteronormative feelings/attractions as them, or, by making sense of, and accepting, feelings/attractions they had that weren't normative. Online spaces provided a place where they could explore, or even discover these identities, often with the safety afforded by being able to visit these communities privately and anonymously. This avenue for exploration was particularly important where participants didn't have access to existing access to queer role models.

The most commonly mentioned platform for this was Tumblr, where participants found queer communities with whom they could engage. However, participants used a range of SNS. P4 and P9 were both members of a Facebook group aimed at queer school-aged kids in their state. However, due to the privacy settings of the group, they had to be invited by existing members they had come out to. P6, at the age of 17, found an online forum for gay teens while browsing the internet and became an active member of the community and eventually a moderator. He spoke of how valuable it was to learn from his peers on that site and how the ability to express his queerness openly, gave him the confidence to come out.

In addition to SNS, participants also used online resources for exploration and learning. These resources were particularly useful surrounding topics they wouldn't otherwise be exposed to, e.g. sexual education, queer relationships or queer history. For example, P7 learned about local queer history online and felt a greater sense of belonging with the community.

4.2 Life in the Online Closet

All participants underwent a period where they had realised that they were queer but felt uneasy, reluctant or even unsafe to come out. This period was talked about by most participants as quite a difficult time that involved feeling unable to express themselves and living double lives, especially when interacting with their families.

Participants described going to great lengths to hide their queerness from family, both in the ways that they used technology and in the physical world. Multiple spoke of how they refrained from liking content or RSVPing to events on Facebook in case the digital traces these actions would cause were seen by those they weren't

out to. P4 talked about how their online self is not their true self out of safety concerns. In the physical world, participants spoke about trying to appear straight, hiding friendships with visibly queer people from their families and not going to major queer events in case their parents correlated the dates. P4 who is closeted to their family described feeling like a "secret spy".

4.3 Coming Out through Technology

Many of the participants came out progressively and/or strategically, often starting with friends that were closest or most likely to be accepting. Sometimes this was an explicit conversation, message or Facebook post, but often it was more subtle hints at their queerness. For example, saying something about someone of the same gender being attractive. Often the reaction to them coming out was overwhelmingly positive despite the fear that preceded it although some participants did have negative experiences. After telling those close to him and his family, P6 used Facebook to broadcast his queerness. He saw it as a way to get the process of coming out over with quickly, and to avoid the stress of having to keep a mental log of who he was out to.

4.4 Technology and Encounters with Heteronormativity

Many participants still feel the burden of actively managing their self-expression in certain situations despite having come out to friends and family. In unfamiliar contexts, especially professional ones, participants spoke of being cautious about being perceived as queer until they were sure they would be safe. For example, P6 spoke about not revealing he was gay at a new job until he saw that a visibly queer colleague was treated well. P4 uses Facebook to vet potential friends or acquaintances. If someone's profile offers anti-queer or alt-right sentiments, they will refuse to befriend them out of safety concerns. For P9, the inability to restrict the privacy of specific posts on Instagram combined with the social pressure to accept follow requests from his colleagues has been particularly troubling. He doesn't want to delete the posts he made pre-transition that would expose him as trans, nor does he want his colleagues to see them. The result is a stressful situation that he doesn't know how to escape.

Many felt the continual burden of having to explain their identity or actions to cis-hets, especially where their queer identity was more complex than merely being gay. Most of the participants had predominantly queer friends and many ascribed the emotional labour of having to explain themselves as a significant reason. Multiple participants used different labels to simplify their identity when talking to cis-hets as they felt this would ease their interactions and result in fewer questions. For P1 this meant conforming to presenting themselves in a trans-masculine way amongst those to whom they had come out to as a trans man, despite having a fluid gender identity that often didn't reflect their earlier declaration. P5 and P9 preferred to refer to themselves broadly as being "queer" however often identified themselves as bi-sexual. For those that were attracted to more than one gender, they described having to continually remind people they were queer when they were in "straight" relationships.

Figure D.3: Page 3 of Armstrong and Leong (2019)

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4.5 Seeking Queer Spaces

This need to explain themselves drove most participants to have mainly queer friends but also to seek out safe physical and virtual spaces where they felt more comfortable being themselves and could let their guard down. When talking about queer-friendly physical spaces, dedicated "Queer Spaces" on university campuses and queer bars/clubs were the most frequently mentioned by our participants. In the virtual realm, participants spoke mainly of their experiences within Facebook groups and on dating apps.

While these spaces provide an opportunity to escape heteronormativity, navigating these spaces often presented additional challenges to participants. P4 spoke of how queer spaces allow them to express themselves freely, while others spoke of cultures of exclusion and harassment that often plagued these spaces. Many of our participants expressed a desire for more inclusive and less sexualised queer spaces. They mentioned places to hang out other than clubs or places to find friendship online instead of dating apps.

Some participants were drawn to dating apps seeking connection to others that went beyond finding romantic or sexual partners. Experiences varied considerably across different apps in terms of how positive they were. Tinder was touted as being much more civil and dating-centric compared to Grindr. Participants saw the latter as both toxic and much more sexualised. However, despite the various negative experiences on Grindr, they continue to be drawn to the app in the hopes of finding positive experiences.

The five participants who had used Grindr described a plethora of negative experiences on it. These ranged from receiving abusive or unsolicited explicit messages to seeing profiles that had racist or otherwise discriminatory lists of unattractive characteristics. They detailed a culture that idolises people who look a certain way and ignores or actively rejects those that don't conform. This negatively impacted their feelings of self-worth. Both P6 and P7 explained how they see the culture on Grindr as self-reinforcing. They described how new users to the app are initially submitted to this toxic culture and eventually become bitter enough to perpetuate it themselves. Participants partly blame the anonymity afforded by the platform for dehumanising profiles and allowing people not to be held accountable for their actions.

By contrast, participants found Tinder to be a friendlier space. Whereas on Grindr anyone can start a conversation, on Tinder both parties need to have "liked" the other. Participants credited this difference for significantly reducing the number of abusive messages they received. It also lowered the potential for them to be rejected as anyone they messaged had to have already liked them.

While Grindr doesn't require disclosure of gender when creating a profile, Tinder does. This is because Tinder relies on people to report their gender and the gender(s) of those they want to see to determine the profiles they are shown. In doing this, it assumes a gender binary which proves problematic for P1 who is non-binary. To overcome this limitation, P1 alternates the gender that they report. They also change the gender of those they want to see to match to ensure that they are only shown to other queer people.

5 DISCUSSION

Despite growing acceptance, queer people still face significant discrimination. All participants continue to face some homophobia,

have to manage their self-expression due to fears around safety and feel more comfortable around other queer people. While some digital technologies have helped mitigate some of these challenges, it is clear that at the same time, it has the potential to open queer people up to harm.

Like others [5, 10, 14], our participants often turned to online spaces to connect and learn about their identity while they were in the formative stages of their queer identity. [5, 10] noted that people often outgrew or decided to move on from these communities once they had developed a greater sense of self-acceptance, something we also saw in our findings. However, despite moving on from these platforms, our participants continue to express the desire for connection to others, including struggling to find alternative spaces (something not discussed by [5, 10]).

As noted previously, five participants turned to Grindr seeking friends, but found a culture that they perceived to have negatively impacted their psychological well-being. [15, 18] cite the psychological burden of always expecting rejection based on one's queerness as a cause for mental health disparities. Our participants' experiences on Grindr reveal a strikingly similar picture of rejection and its negative impacts, but instead, from within their own community. While others [2, 22] have looked at the different motivations for the use of Grindr and explored reasons for leaving, prior work has only alluded in passing to its toxic culture of abuse and harassment. Likewise, while lateral violence and toxic cultures within the queer community have been discussed in specific contexts, e.g. within trans safe spaces [19] and on Tumblr [5], its pervasiveness is clearly an issue which requires further exploration.

Our work, like others [6, 11, 12, 19], found a need for greater autonomy over self-presentation on SNS. Some platforms, such as Tumblr, allow a great deal of autonomy due to the anonymity they afford [5]. However, similarly to [19], we found that, while a strategy for enabling autonomy, anonymity can enable harassment and victimisation. SNS that don't offer anonymity or provide adequate autonomy to manage self-presentation, constrain participants in the way they can behave and the vigilance that this requires likely contributes to minority stress. As such, we echo the calls of [6, 11, 12] to design SNS that allow queer people greater autonomy over the way their identity and actions are presented. In doing this, we agree with [19] when they argue for designers to "examine the very structures of their technological creations and the way they enable harm against marginalized individuals".

6 LIMITATIONS

Our exploratory study adds to the slowly growing scholarship by adding further nuanced understandings of how digital technology use shape the experiences and well-being of queer people. However, this understanding is limited by the small sample size. Also, despite seeking participants with diverse queer identities, no one identified as intersex, asexual or lesbian, although there were multiple bisexual non-cis-men. This disparity will need to be addressed in future work. Nevertheless, this paper provides a window into the complex experiences that queer people face and highlights the need for further work in this space.

Figure D.4: Page 4 of Armstrong and Leong (2019)

SNS and the Lived Experiences of Queer Youth

OZCHI'19, December 2–5, 2019, Fremantle, WA, Australia

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Figure D.5: Page 5 of Armstrong and Leong (2019)

D.2 “This is the kind of experience I want to have”: Supporting the experiences of queer young men on social platforms through design (Armstrong et al., 2024)



“This is the kind of experience I want to have”: Supporting the experiences of queer young men on social platforms through design

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ABSTRACT

Queer young men (similar to others in the LGBTQ+ community) depend heavily on social platforms but their use can often be problematic. Their needs are often not adequately considered in the design of general platforms and they can be exposed to intra-community harms on LGBTQ+ specific platforms such as dating apps. To explore how social platform design could be improved to better support the needs of queer young men, we conducted a co-design study. We recruited 13 queer men working in technology design to generate new concepts for social platform features. We then refined these concepts and evaluated them in group sessions with end users, a different cohort of 15 queer young men. Here we present mockups of the concepts and findings from evaluations. Our findings show specific ways that providing more agency to social platform users could improve their experiences and we discuss implications for design.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI; Interface design prototyping; Empirical studies in interaction design; Social media; Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing; • Social and professional topics** → **Sexual orientation.**

KEYWORDS

queer, LGBTQ+, young people, social media, dating apps, co-design

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1 INTRODUCTION

LGBTQ+¹ young people depend heavily on social platforms to find peer support and explore their identities [15, 17, 20, 27, 28]. However, they are often not considered in the design of such platforms [16]. Work within HCI and the humanities has explored how social platforms shape the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people on social platforms [1, 11, 15, 17, 20, 28, 39]. While they can experience great benefits from social platforms, their design means that LGBTQ+ young people can be exposed to harm. For example, social platforms can provide a way to explore being queer² or trans^{3,4} and connect to peers but they can also lead to the unintentional disclosure of their identities or harassment [11, 20, 39]. However, there is comparatively little work that uses design-led approaches to explore how the design of social platforms could be improved to be more supportive of this group.

To address this gap, we conducted a series of co-design workshops that involved both queer designers and end users. This work forms part of broader research exploring how social platforms shape the experiences of queer young men in Australia. We include dating apps within the scope of this work as they are important sites of connection for LGBTQ+ young people [8]. While many LGBTQ+ young people share similar experiences, there are nuanced differences between the experiences of and platforms used by different subgroups within the community. We chose to focus this research

¹LGBTQ+ is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. The + recognises all non-straight, non-cisgender identities [23].

²Queer describes people whose sexual orientation is not exclusively heterosexual [23].

³Transgender, or trans, is an adjective to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth [24].

⁴For stylistic reasons, we alternate between using LGBTQ+ and queer and trans, as together, they cover the groups represented in the acronym.

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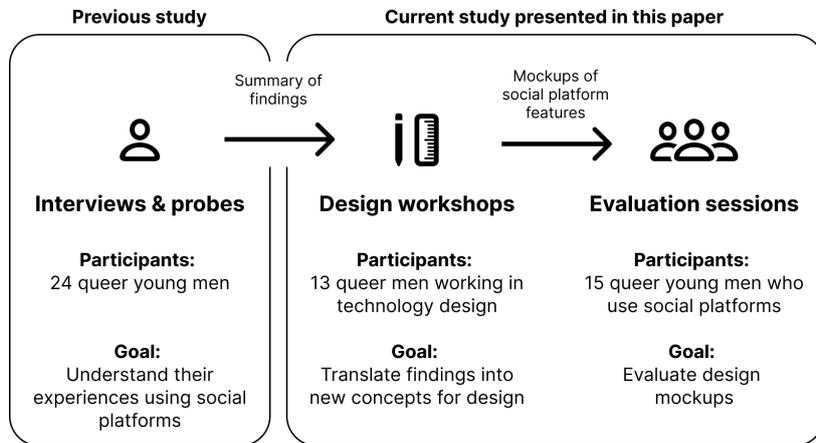


Figure 1: Overview of the research. This paper presents findings from the design workshops and evaluation sessions.

on the experiences of young men in particular, as the first author is a queer young man himself. See section 3.3 for more information about the positionality of the authors.

In the current design-led study, we explored and evaluated how new social platform features could shape the experiences of queer young men. To ground our design explorations, we drew on our empirical findings from a previous study with this group (see section 3.1.2). In the first stage of this study, we ran co-design workshops with designers based in the San Francisco Bay Area to generate new concepts for social platform features (see section 3.1). In the second stage, we presented mockups of features based on these concepts to participants in the Australian demographic for evaluation (see section 3.2). See Figure 1 for an overview of the research.

This paper presents mockups for social platform features that emerged from the co-design workshops and findings from the evaluation sessions. Together, they contribute to understanding how social platforms could be designed in ways that better support queer young men and provide them more agency over the kinds of experiences they have.

While our work focuses on queer young men, contributing to the growing body of work in HCI surrounding the experiences of LGBTQ+ people can also positively impact how technology is understood and designed for all [14, 17]. As Queer HCI researchers have argued, work that involves queer and trans communities can offer a unique perspective to identity management and online communities, among other areas [14, 17].

2 RELATED WORK

In this section, we present how queer young people use social platforms, their use of dating apps as sites of connection and issues around consent identified by prior work. We then discuss prior use of design-led approaches to social platform research with LGBTQ+ people.

2.1 Social platform use by queer young people

LGBTQ+ young people depend heavily on social platforms. While there has been significant progress in the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in many countries, they still face widespread stigma [40] which can make it difficult or unsafe for many to express and be open about their identities [10, 15]. Social platforms can provide LGBTQ+ young people a place to explore their identities and find social support from peers, often without having to disclose being queer or trans to their existing contexts, which may be unsupportive [15, 17, 20, 27, 28].

While LGBTQ+ young people use many of the same platforms as their heteronormative peers, the norms of specific platforms can vary. For example, while in heteronormative studies, participants described Facebook as a place for “personal” presentations [50], queer and trans people often feel they must curate out their identities on the platform. Often, this is because of an expectation of being “friends” with one’s family on Facebook, an audience to which many LGBTQ+ young people do not feel comfortable disclosing their identities [10, 15, 28, 31, 45].

Prior work has shown that while LGBTQ+ young people can use various strategies to curate audiences and manage privacy,

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there are barriers and risks to using social platforms in this way [10, 11, 15]. For example, "context collapse", the phenomenon when different contexts unexpectedly clash on social platforms, makes it harder to target performances to a particular context and can lead to inadvertent disclosure of LGBTQ+ identity [10, 11, 15, 36]. Similarly, Carrasco and Kerne [9] argue that platforms do not allow LGBTQ+ people enough flexibility over the visibility of their profiles and content. Moreover, while social platforms offer many benefits to LGBTQ+ young people, they can also have detrimental impacts. Research shows that social technology use by LGBTQ+ people can lead to distress, with the potential for them to experience victimisation or discrimination [9, 25, 38, 43].

2.2 Dating apps as sites of connection

Dating and hookup apps are often left out of explorations of the way queer young people use social platforms (e.g. [9, 15, 21, 45]) and have instead been researched separately (e.g. [3, 30, 33]). Prior work has emphasised that people use a range of social platforms in concert with each other and discouraged studying single platforms [15, 29, 50]. However, as Byron et al. [8] note, there is often a problematic separation made between dating apps and other social platforms that does not reflect the role they can play in finding friendships and connections to community.

Dating apps are widely used by LGBTQ+ young men for varied purposes. Grindr, a location-based people nearby application targeted primarily at queer men, is one of the most widely used applications [8, 30]. Although initially created for queer men seeking hookups, it is also a place where other forms of connection can be sought, for example, romantic partners or friendship [3, 8, 30, 53].

2.3 Issues around consent

Prior work with queer young men has highlighted that issues around consent on social platforms are prevalent [18, 19]. On dating apps, mismatched expectations between users about what they are for can lead to negative experiences [7, 48]. Those seeking forms of connection other than hookups on dating apps may also be less satisfied with their experiences [7, 12]. Additionally, as Wongsomboon et al. [48][p. 8] note, "the sexualized culture of adult online dating communities (aimed largely at cisgender sexual minority men) can be intimidating for adolescents and youth experiencing such culture for the first time". Similarly, research by Zytoko et al. [52] with both queer and non-queer participants who use Tinder found that people often assume others are on the app solely to look for sex, even if someone's profile states otherwise. As Zytoko et al. [52] describes, incorrect assumptions about what others were looking for could lead to mismatched expectations or sexual violence.

Receiving unsolicited explicit or "Not Safe for Work" (NSFW) content is also a common consent issue [19]. However, while work with queer men has explored unsolicited sexually explicit content being shared directly with people (e.g. [46]) or on dating apps (e.g. [19]), little attention has been paid to issues of consent where content is posted to one's social platforms account using features that restrict audiences, for example, Instagram's Close Friends.

In a broader context, Im et al. [32] explore how affirmative consent could be applied as a theoretical framework for understanding

social platforms and imagining new features. They define affirmative consent as "the idea that someone must ask for – and earn – enthusiastic approval before interacting with another person" [32, p. 1]. They then apply this to social platforms through five concepts "which are derived from feminist, legal and HCI literature in the context of social platforms: affirmative consent is *voluntary, informed, reversible, specific, and unburdensome*" [32, p. 1]. They then use these concepts to highlight ways social platforms fail to provide sufficient consent to users before using them to generate new ideas for design. While Im et al. [32] explore issues of consent in user interactions, they also go beyond this, for example, arguing social platforms ought to provide users more agency over the visibility of content they share and the content they interact with.

2.4 Using design-led approaches to improve social platform experiences

A growing body of work explores the experiences on social platforms of queer young men and LGBTQ+ people more broadly through qualitative methods. Work within HCI has often provided design considerations; for example, Carrasco and Kerne [9] argue for features that afford users greater "selective visibility" over their social platform presences. However, few studies explore the implementation of such considerations in terms of design.

To date, there has been comparatively little work that uses design-led approaches to understand how to improve platform design for LGBTQ+ people, with some exceptions (e.g. [16, 26, 29, 51]). While such work has generated valuable concepts and findings for design, the design approaches employed often stopped short of developing concepts and evaluating them with users. For example, as Hardy et al. [29][p. 525:7] note, their use of participatory design workshops was "primarily a process of design inquiry". A notable exception was work by Pereira and Baranauskas [41], which used a series of co-design workshops with LGBTQ+ participants who developed and then evaluated social platform designs. Similarly, while Im et al. [32] generated many ideas for design through the application of affirmative consent to social platforms, it was beyond the scope of their work to evaluate the concepts they generated with users. To address this gap, there is a need to contribute more design-led work that explores how social platforms could be improved to better support the experiences of LGBTQ+ people.

3 METHOD

This study is part of broader research that explores how the design of social platforms shapes the experiences of queer young men. Following the work of others who have emphasised the importance of using participatory approaches that give voice to LGBTQ+ users [16, 26, 29, 41, 51], we employed co-design methods to explore new directions for social platform design.

Similar to the work of others (e.g. Derix et al. [13]), we conducted this work in two phases, first recruiting professionals working in technology design to generate concepts, then evaluating them with users following a concept-driven or design workbook approach [22, 44]. In the first phase, we conducted design workshops with participants working in technology design in the San Francisco Bay Area to generate concepts for social platform features, presenting findings from a previous study to act as inspiration for design

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(see section 3.1.2). In the second phase, we refined these concepts into a series of design mockups (see Table 1 for an overview) and presented them in a series of evaluation sessions. See Figure 1 for an overview of the research.

Following other work exploring LGBTQ+ young people's use of social platforms [20, 38], this research focuses on the experiences of participants between 18 and 28. Three main considerations supported this decision. Firstly, LGBTQ+ young people depend heavily on social platforms [15, 17, 20, 27, 28] and we wanted to focus on their experiences. Secondly, this work explores participants' practices on dating apps and in NSFW contexts, adult places where minors should not be. Finally, generational differences in the ways LGBTQ+ people in Australia use social platforms [42] led us to restrict the age range.

Both the previous study and the evaluation sessions were conducted in an Australian metropolitan city, while the design workshops were conducted in San Francisco. The San Francisco Bay Area is home to the headquarters of many technology companies, and this means that there are many more interaction designers who are experts in their field there than where the authors are usually based. We conducted the design workshops there for this reason, and because the first author had the opportunity to travel there. While there was a geographic difference between stages, the workshops were grounded in the experiences of Australian participants (see section 3.1.2) and did not involve the sharing of technology designers' personal experiences. The resulting concepts were then evaluated in the same context as the original participants (see section 3.2).

This research was approved by the university's Human Research Ethics Committee.

3.1 Design workshops

To generate new concepts for social platform features, we conducted two design workshops. Based on findings from the previous study (see section 3.1.2), posters were created for each of the five areas of findings and given to participants so that they could explore them in-depth and at their own pace. The first author, who facilitated the workshops, presented an overview of each of the posters at the beginning and answered questions about the findings (posters can be found in the supplementary materials). This was then followed by co-design activities (detailed in 3.1.3).

3.1.1 Participants and recruitment. We distributed adverts describing the study on social platforms through the networks of the first author and through paid placements targeting queer men working in technology design. The first author also contacted technology designers working in the San Francisco Bay Area to invite them to take part. The adverts directed to a sign-up form to provide contact details and answer screening questions. Participants were invited to attend based on their professional experience. 8 participants attended the first workshop and 5 the second. Participants all worked in technology design, 6 at FAANG⁵ companies, 5 as senior designers or above, 3 as designers, 2 as software engineers involved in UX design as well as a senior research engineer, a product manager and an accessibility engineer. All participants were queer men, 6

⁵Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Google

were white, 5 were Asian, and 2 were Latino. This clearly does not provide coverage of all ethnic groups but nonetheless provides reasonable diversity. As noted in section 2.4, prior co-design work with LGBTQ+ end-users has often been done as a process of design inquiry and not led to concepts that were further developed. While none of the designers worked directly on social media apps, their senior roles in the field and experience allowed them to effectively create actionable concepts. Furthermore, all were queer men and end-users of such platforms, and as such, they brought a valuable combination of "insider knowledge" as both designers and end-users.

3.1.2 Using participant experiences as inspiration for design. Findings generated in the previous study were used to ground the design workshops. In that study, 24 queer young men were interviewed about their use of social platforms. The study involved two interviews and the use of a kit of probes, each of which similar to Wallace et al. [47, p. 343], "related to different facets of what we thought might be significant, as informed by theory and our own experiences". The first interview served to get a broad sense of how participants experienced and felt about their use of social platforms. Following others [4, 37, 54], the second interview used the returned probes as a dialogical tool – co-interpreting them with participants to develop a shared understanding of their experiences. The first author, in consultation with the others, used reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke [5, 6] to generate findings.

3.1.3 Co-design activities. Both workshops ran for approximately two hours, with participants working in small groups to complete activities. Workshops started with an introduction, including an icebreaker activity before the first author presented the findings posters. In the first half, participants wrote on post-it notes, and in some cases sketched, initial ideas for social platform features that responded to the findings. The first author clustered the ideas, and in the second half, gave participants groups of them to develop into concepts. Concept sheets were given to participants to provide a structured way for them to flesh out concepts, including providing a name, rationale, description, sketches and evaluations (see the supplementary materials for a copy). The workshops ended with a closing discussion that asked participants to reflect on the concepts they had created.

3.2 Evaluation sessions

Concepts developed in the design workshops were refined and then evaluated with 15 local participants in one of three group evaluation sessions. This follows concept-driven [44] and design workbook [22] approaches as a form of participant engagement, which use designed mockups as a way to ground explorations of theoretical proposals.

3.2.1 Participants and recruitment. Similar to the design workshops, we distributed adverts describing the evaluation sessions through the networks of the first author and through paid placements. The adverts directed people to a sign-up form to provide contact details and answer screening questions. To include a range of demographics and experiences, we selected participants based on their self-described age, cultural background, and social platform usage. The first author also invited participants from the previous

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Australian study (see section 3.1.2), 5 of whom participated in this phase of the research as well. 3 participants attended the first evaluation session, 7 the second and 5 the third. 11 participants were cisgender while 4 were trans. 10 identified as white/European, 3 as Asian, 1 as Latino and 1 as mixed-race European and Pacific. While we were unable to provide coverage of all ethnic groups, this sample broadly reflects the Australian demographic [2]. The youngest participant was 19, and the oldest was 28.

3.2.2 Creating mockups. Based on the ideas and concepts generated in the design workshops, the first author created a number of mockups to evaluate with participants (presented in section 4). He started by visually mapping and clustering the concepts and ideas generated. From this, he selected concepts he thought would be the most supportive of queer young men's experiences to be further developed. Then, he refined the concepts through sketching before creating mockups using Figma⁶. In the process, he drew on the concept sheets completed at the workshops.

Many of the concepts created in the design workshops were based on Instagram and Grindr. Similarly, Instagram and Grindr were the two social platforms participants talked about most in the previous study and are very commonly used. In creating the refined mockups, the first author designed them as features for these apps. By basing the mockups on these apps, the features could be shown in less abstract ways and in contexts that participants in the evaluation sessions were already familiar with. Additionally, by using these two apps which represent different kinds of social platforms, the range of different features developed could be represented in ways that were coherent. For example, the concept *Smart social circles* (4.4.1, Figure 7) relies on posting content to a profile of followers, like one does on Instagram, but this is not usually possible on dating apps. Conversely, the concept *Providing more control over who can find and message you* (4.2.1, Figure 4) is most suited for a dating app such as Grindr where there is a desire to "match" with unknown others.

3.2.3 Evaluation session activities. Evaluation sessions lasted approximately 2 hours. They started with a brief introduction to the session and an icebreaker before the first author led participants through evaluations of each of the design mockups. Worksheets that described and showcased the mockups were given to participants (worksheets can be found in the supplementary materials). The worksheets also had space for participants to rate each concept, provide justification for their rating and suggest improvements.

Mockups were presented in the same groups as they are in this paper (see Table 1). For each group, the first author explained them and then gave participants time to explore them and complete the worksheet. In the second and third sessions, at which numbers allowed, participants worked in 2-3 person groups, discussing the mockups and completing the worksheets collaboratively. The first author would then lead a discussion where participants shared their thoughts. When discussion had been exhausted, the process was repeated with the next group of mockups.

Using worksheets had multiple benefits. Participants could draw on and annotate the mockups with comments. They allowed time

for structured reflection and exploration before the discussion. Finally, they also provided a useful resource during analysis where points that had not been raised in the discussion were found.

3.2.4 Reflexive Thematic Analysis. As Braun and Clarke [6] note, thematic analysis is often perceived as a single method where, in fact, there are multiple approaches, each with its own procedure and epistemological foundation. As a constructionist epistemological approach underpins this work, we chose to follow the reflexive thematic analysis approach described by Braun and Clarke [5, 6]. Reflexive thematic analysis involves six phases that act as guidelines for analytic engagement and are often conducted in non-linear or recursive ways, supporting reflexivity and continued engagement with the data [34]. The six phases are: familiarising yourself with the dataset; coding; generating initial themes; developing and reviewing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up [6, 34].

The first author transcribed the workshop recordings as part of the data familiarisation process. He then used Atlas.ti⁷ to code the transcripts and completed worksheets in an inductive and iterative way that described the semantic meaning communicated by participants and the latent meaning he interpreted from what they described. After initial coding, he organised and refined the codes. He used the resulting codes to create initial themes that reflected participants reactions to the concepts. Where themes were closely related, he grouped them into overarching themes. In total, 12 themes were developed across 4 overarching themes. Throughout this process, the first author consulted with the other authors by presenting initial and draft versions of the coding, themes and theme descriptions. Through discussion, they contributed to refining the initial codes and developing, naming and organising themes. The decisions for the first author to complete all the coding and to code latent meaning reflect the constructionist epistemological approach taken in this work, which values the researcher's subjectivity and renders attempts to demonstrate "coding reliability and the avoidance of 'bias' [as] illogical, incoherent and ultimately meaningless" [6, p334].

3.3 Positionality of authors

I (the first author) am a cisgender queer young man, like many participants involved in the research. In consultation with the other authors, I organised and facilitated the design workshops and evaluation sessions. This involved designing the activities, creating the mockups, recruiting participants and analysing the data. Similarly, in the previous interview and probe study (see section 3.1.2 and Figure 1), I was primarily responsible for interviewing participants, facilitating the use of the probe kit and analysing the data. My experience as an insider within the community enabled me to build rapport with participants. It also allowed me to read between the lines of what participants were saying or to understand their shorthand. I suspect that being a visibly queer man of a similar age to most participants made them feel more comfortable sharing their experiences. On the other hand, some participants may have curated what they shared with me and other participants to present

⁶Figma, Inc. 2024. Figma. <https://figma.com>

⁷ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH. 2024. ATLAS.ti. <https://atlasti.com>.

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themselves in a better light. While my insider status has been helpful, I have also taken great care to avoid assuming participants have had the same experiences and to do justice to their unique situations, experiences and outlooks. Nevertheless, it is impossible to remove the researcher from the research, especially in qualitative work such as this, and it is important to acknowledge my position in relation to the work.

Authors two, three and four have contributed to the research design and reporting. They did not have any contact with participants. Author two is also a cisgender gay man, which meant that similar to the first author, he could relate to some of the perspectives participants described. The second author notes that this could have led to assumptions about the participants' experiences or the research direction but did his best to remain as guided and led by literature and participants' data as possible. Authors three and four do not identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Author three is a heterosexual cisgender man, and author four is a heterosexual cisgender woman. She has completed training offered by the university to be an ally to those belonging to sexual and gender minorities.

4 DESIGN MOCKUPS

In this section, we describe the design mockups presented to participants in the evaluation sessions. See Table 1 for an overview.

4.1 Design concepts that block unwanted messages

On dating apps such as Tinder, one must "match" with someone before any messages can be exchanged. However, dating apps such as Grindr allow anyone to message. While this has positives, receiving unwanted messages, especially unsolicited explicit pictures, is a common problem [19]. These concepts offer users more control over how people can message them.

4.1.1 New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics. (Figure 2) Some platforms, for example, Instagram, hide pictures sent by those one is not following by default – that way, users can decide if they want to reveal what may be a problematic image from an unknown other. Alternatively, some platforms, such as Tinder, do not allow pictures or videos to be sent at all. On the other hand, some do not mind receiving NSFW content, especially on dating apps where they may see it as part of facilitating sexual encounters with those they interact with [19, 52]. Some platforms, such as Grindr, recognise variation in whether users would like to receive NSFW content – they offer three profile options for communicating one's openness to receiving NSFW pictures, "yes please", "not at first" and "never". While this allows users to explicitly consent, or not, it relies on someone being proactive enough to check before deciding whether to send NSFW content. This allows users to automatically block or blur NSFW pics.

4.1.2 Block repeated messages. (Figure 3) A common complaint on dating apps such as Grindr that do not have "matching" processes is receiving repeated messages from the same user. This concept allows users to limit how often people can message them. There's an option to allow repeat messages from people in their favourites.

4.2 Design concepts that help align expectations

Dating apps are particularly important places of connection for queer young men and are used for a variety of reasons [3, 8]. However, mismatched expectations can cause issues and many face abuse or harassment [19, 48, 52]. These concepts offer ways to better align expectations.

4.2.1 Providing more control over who can find and message you. (Figure 4) A common feature of dating apps is offering users a way to filter the profiles they see. On matching-based apps such as Tinder, this affects not only the profiles of others presented to a user but also who the user is presented to. On apps such as Grindr, the filters a user selects do not limit their visibility to others, meaning that someone outside their filters is able to contact them. This concept changes Looking For from a static profile field and makes it a filter so that it is easier to change based on what users are after each time they use the app. It also allows the option for filters to be bi-directional. Finally, it shows messages from people they have not interacted with in a separate tab as message requests.

4.2.2 Signalling what you are looking for. (Figure 5) What someone is looking for can vary depending on who they are talking to, so this concept allows users to tailor what their profile shows under Looking For. When messaging someone for the first time, users are prompted to say what they are looking for. In the chat window users can now see both others and their own Looking For and NSFW picture preferences so expectations are clearer.

4.3 Design concepts that help people use dating apps

Sometimes dating apps can be overwhelming, especially when first joining and if users are unsure who to ask for help getting started [48]. People also have different expectations of how to behave on the apps. The concept below explores how a chatbot could help address these issues.

4.3.1 Grindr Bot. (Figure 6) This concept explores what a dating app chatbot could look like. When users first install the app, it helps onboard them. They can also ask it questions they have. Finally, it prompts users when it thinks they are going to do something that might be disrespectful.

4.4 Design concepts for improving agency over what you see and share

These concepts give users more agency over the content they see and the audiences for content that they share.

4.4.1 Smart social circles. (Figure 7) Many social apps have ways to filter the audience of posts users make; for example, Instagram has Close Friends. However, such features often allow for only one list, which can be problematic. This concept allows users to create multiple lists and uses AI to suggest lists when posting, as well as people to include in them. This mock-up shows stories but this could also be an option when making posts.

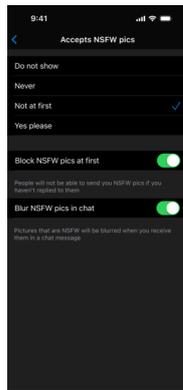
4.4.2 Focus modes for content feeds. (Figure 8) At the moment, many apps offer an algorithmic feed or a chronological one. While there are options to filter out content from algorithmic feeds this

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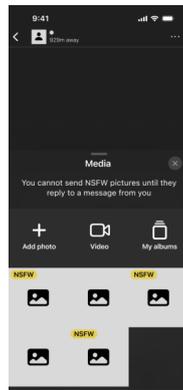
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Table 1: Overview of mockups

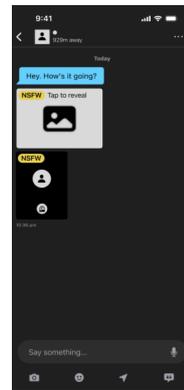
Group of design concepts	Mock-up	Designed for
4.1 Design concepts that block unwanted messages	4.1.1 New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics	Grindr
4.2 Design concepts that help align expectations	4.1.2 Block repeated messages	Grindr
4.3 Design concepts that help people use dating apps	4.2.1 Providing more control over who can find and message you	Grindr
4.4 Design concepts for improving agency over what you see and share	4.2.2 Signalling what you are looking for	Grindr
4.5 Design concepts for finding connection to community	4.3.1 Grindr Bot	Grindr
	4.4.1 Smart social circles	Instagram
	4.4.2 Focus modes for content feeds	Instagram
	4.5.1 Suggested topics	Instagram
	4.5.2 Local Guide	Grindr



(a) New options for blocking or blurring NSFW pictures are given alongside the existing profile options.



(b) If blocking is enabled, people will be blocked from sending NSFW pics at first. To make this clear, a new message is shown when sending pictures, and a new NSFW label highlights which pictures the app has identified as being explicit.



(c) If blurring is enabled, NSFW pics will be blurred until the user taps to open them.

Figure 2: Mockups of a Grindr interface for New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics (section 4.1.1)

is often static [32] and there is little control over what one sees in the moment. This concept allows users to create customisable focus modes over the content that gets presented to them. They can choose how much content is from friends or suggested, allow or block NSFW content, set the feed type to chronological or algorithmic as well as set what kinds of content they do or do not want to see.

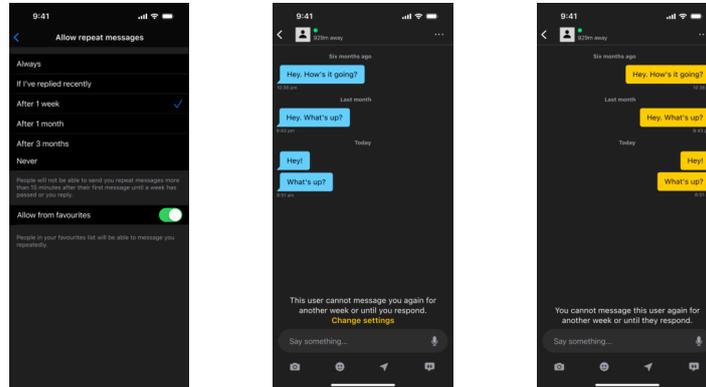
4.5 Design concepts for finding connection to community

Social platforms often offer LGBTQ+ young people ways to learn about being queer or trans and connect to others in the LGBTQ+ community [8, 20, 38]. These concepts try to support this.

4.5.1 Suggested topics. (Figure 9) This concept would make it easier to explore topics related to the content one sees. This example shows how it could help uncover LGBT history content, but this

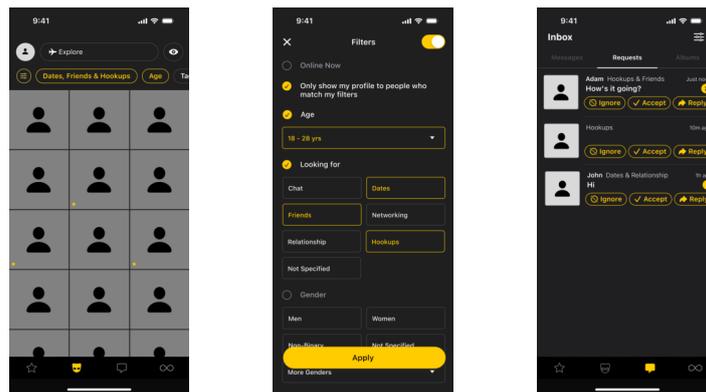
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- (a) New options for blocking repeated messages. People will have a 15-minute window to send messages before it becomes a repeat message.
- (b) If enabled, a new notice will show when someone is blocked from sending messages and provide users with the option to change their settings.
- (c) A new notice is displayed when someone is blocked from sending new messages.

Figure 3: Mockups of a Grindr interface for *Block repeated messages* (section 4.1.2)

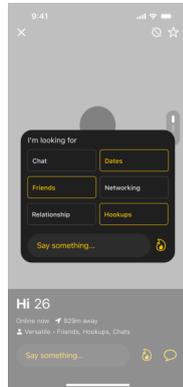


- (a) What users are looking for is now highlighted at the top of their filters.
- (b) New option to limit who can see users to those within their filters. Looking For is more prominent.
- (c) A new requests tab shows messages from people users have not interacted with before.

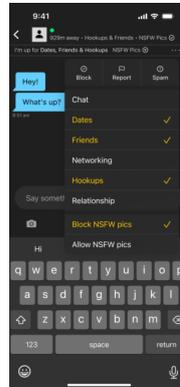
Figure 4: Mockups of a Grindr interface for *Providing more control over who can find and message you* (section 4.2.1)

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(a) New modal for users to signal what they are looking for when they message/tap someone. This defaults to their current Looking For but can be customised.



(b) The chat window now shows both users' expectations for Looking For and NSFW pictures. Users can change this at any time using the dropdown menu.

Figure 5: Mockups of a Grindr interface for Signalling what you are looking for (section 4.2.2)

could happen for any kind of content and provide a way to more actively explore communities.

4.5.2 *Local Guide.* (Figure 10) Maybe a user is in a new city or just wants to get more involved in the local LGBTQ+ community where they are. This concept showcases a new explore feature for Grindr that lets users find out about a city and its LGBTQ+ events, places and support services. It also helps them find people who are local or perhaps just passing through.

5 FINDINGS

Through our analysis, we developed a number of themes related to participants responses to the mockups. We present themes in four sections: 1) providing more opportunities for consent and clarifying expectations, 2) providing more agency over self-presentation, 3) providing transparency and control over automated, algorithmic and AI features, and 4) providing ways to connect with local communities.

5.1 Providing more opportunities for consent and clarifying expectations

Participants greatly appreciated features that gave them agency over the kinds of interactions they had, particularly on dating apps. This section explores participants' responses to features designed to address issues of consent and mismatched expectations.

5.1.1 *Providing more agency over receiving or viewing NSFW pictures.* Participants overwhelmingly liked the ability the mock-up, *New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics*(4.1.1, Figure 2), provided them to block NSFW pictures. One participant not use Grindr because of how common it is to be sent NSFW pictures and said that were this feature available, he would start using the app. Similarly, participants liked the ability to toggle blocking NSFW pictures within a chat as afforded by *Signalling what you are looking for*(4.2.2, see Figure 5b). Currently, Grindr allows users to specify their preference for receiving NSFW pictures as "never", "not at first" or "yes please". While the first and last options are clear, "not at first" may be ambiguous, and this ability to signal gives agency to users to communicate when and if they are happy to receive them.

The main concerns around features that block NSFW content were related to how the app would identify NSFW content. These and other concerns related to automated features are discussed in section 5.3.3. Additionally, some participants expressed that they are happy to receive NSFW pictures. However, they appreciated that others would benefit and were not opposed to their existence.

The automatic blurring of NSFW pictures shown in *New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics*(4.1.1, Figure 2) was also popular with participants. As they noted, blurring all pictures, by default, is a simpler solution than detecting whether they are NSFW. However, it still provides agency to users to decide whether they want to see a picture. One participant noted that Instagram by default already blurs pictures from people one does not follow.

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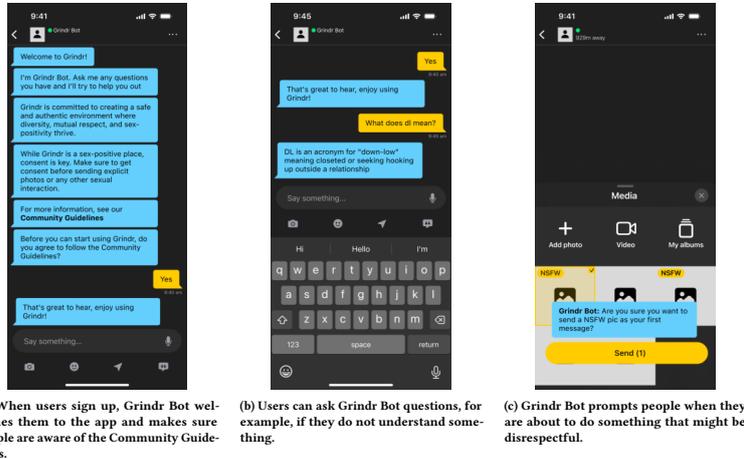


Figure 6: Mockups of a Grindr interface for Grindr Bot (section 4.3.1)

"it gives you a blurry version of it. And then you can go, 'That's a dick. I'm not going to look at it.' But like, if you look at it and it's like purple, you're like, 'Okay, that's not a dick.'" [Evaluation session two]

The desire to control receiving NSFW pictures could also be situational. Participants described situations where they thought the blur function would be beneficial, for example, when using Grindr in a public place. Similarly, participants appreciated the ways *Focus modes for content feeds*(4.4.2, Figure 8) could help them sanitise their content feeds in situations where it would not be appropriate for NSFW content to appear. One group suggested making this more accessible by including a toggle they could quickly use to remove NSFW content from their feed.

5.1.2 *Supporting people to communicate what they are looking for and expectations in dynamic ways.* A common reason that participants liked *New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics*(4.1.1, Figure 2) and *Signalling what you are looking for*(4.2.2, Figure 5) was that they would make their expectations around receiving NSFW content and what they are looking for very clear to other users.

"I quite like this feature in that, I mean, the intent of Grindr is to find people quickly, whether you're dating or hooking up, it's trying to get to a connection as quick as possible. And I feel like this helps you get there. It's not a tap, it's not a vague emoji. It's 'I'm looking for this, this and this with you.'" [Evaluation session three]

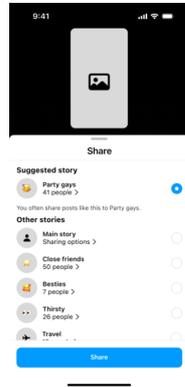
While Grindr profiles can already show what a user is looking for and whether they consent to receiving NSFW pics, it is common for profiles to be ignored. Participants liked that *New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics*(4.1.1, Figure 2) would prevent people from ignoring their preferences and sending NSFW content anyway and that *Signalling what you are looking for*(4.2.2, see Figure 5b) puts what they are looking for and their preferences in a very obvious place at the top of the chat screen. In addition, participants thought it would be helpful to see signals from others which would help them decide how to interact, for example, when talking to someone who is only looking for hookups compared to someone who is interested in dates.

"I also like that it's... there's a flag at the top. So, depending... regardless of how many conversations you've had, you're reminded constantly based on a specific prompt that they've input into the system, what they're looking for. So you might not have messaged them for a month or two, and you instantly know what they're looking for. I think that's beneficial." [Evaluation session three]

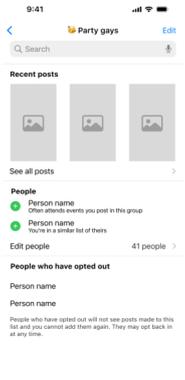
Participants also liked the ability that *Signalling what you are looking for*(4.2.2, Figure 5) would provide them to adjust their expectations for specific users as they could vary depending on who they were talking to as well as their current mood and situation. Some participants suggested that there should be a way to signal on their profile what they are looking for in that moment separately to what they are generally looking for, for example, if they are temporarily

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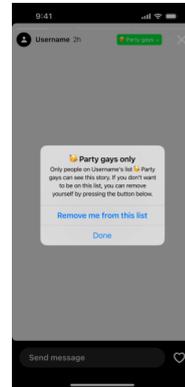
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(a) When posting a story, users can now pick from a number of lists. A suggestion is made for which list to share it to, and other lists are shown below.



(b) A new edit list interface. Users can see recent posts, get suggestions for who to add and see who has opted out.



(c) When viewing a story shared to a private list, users can see the name of the list as well as opt out of it.

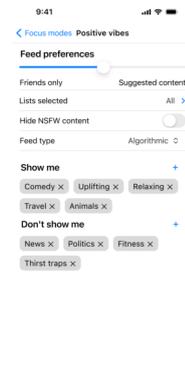
Figure 7: Mockups of an Instagram interface for *Smart social circles* (section 4.4.1)



(a) Users can select a focus mode to change what the algorithm presents them.



(b) Users can create focus modes that suit different moods or contexts.



(c) Each mode is customisable.

Figure 8: Mockups of an Instagram interface for *Focus modes for content feeds* (section 4.4.2)

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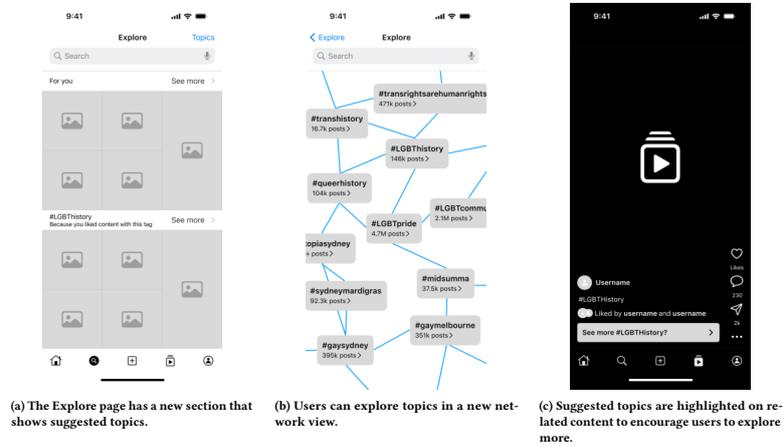


Figure 9: Mockups of an Instagram interface for Suggested topics (section 4.5.1)

open to hooks. Participants also noted that being able to signal to specific users could allow someone who is reluctant to put what they are actually looking for on their profile to more accurately present themselves to someone they are talking to.

Participants much preferred the option to change their expectations within the chat window at a time of their choosing (see Figure 5b) compared to when beginning an interaction with someone (see Figure 5a). Some thought that customising this for each new interaction was overkill. Others highlighted that they often do not know what to expect before interacting. The third evaluation session had an in-depth discussion between participants about how it would look when someone changes what they are looking for with you.

Interestingly, participants thought that regardless of whether they changed the expectations signalled to another user, that their profile should still state their general preferences and not be overridden. However, some commented that this might lead them to be more conservative on their profile so that when signalling, they are more likely to add something they are looking for than to remove something.

“I think the benefit of this is that it’s short-cutting communication. So, yes, they might have one thing on their profile, but they made it clear that they’re only looking for chats with you” [Evaluation session three]

5.1.3 Building consent into features that target audiences. Building more consent into features that target audiences was another area

where participants appreciated increased agency over seeing NSFW pictures. The ability to opt-out of someone’s private list for stories, as shown in *Smart social circles*(4.4.1, see Figure 7c), was widely desired. However, a number of participants suggested that this did not go far enough and wanted private stories to be opt-in. During discussions about how opting in could work, the first author suggested being prompted the first time a private story appears and received the following response:

“Yeah, of course. ‘cause it’s just like, instead of just being shown. Like for example, if you’re just swiping, it would just go to someone’s Close Friends without any choice of whose Close Friends you’re gonna see next, or for the first time. And so like obviously now if I get that opt-in to like, oh, are you happy to join this person’s ‘booty pics’ [private story], then you’re allowing, you know, whatever group you’re added into, if you’re given that choice, then it’s a safe mechanism to not be shown anything that you don’t want to see.” [Evaluation session one]

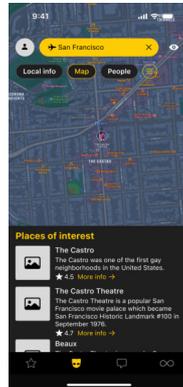
One participant noted, however, that such a feature may be undermined by people naming and using their private lists in a way that suggests they will be safe for work but then later posting NSFW content. One suggestion was to provide the option to blur NSFW content by default on platforms such as Instagram. Another suggestion was based on the way Instagram currently highlights Close Friends stories by making the circle that appears around a

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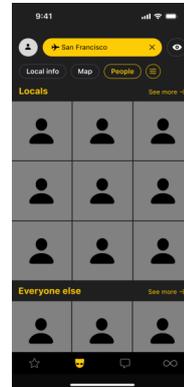
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(a) The local info page gives information about a city, LGBTQ+ events that are on and community support services.



(b) The map page shows a map of LGBTQ+ places users can explore.



(c) The people page lets users find people based on whether they are local or not. Maybe they want to find someone who knows the city well or a fellow traveller to explore with.

Figure 10: Mockups of a Grindr interface for *Local Guide* (section 4.5.2)

user's profile picture in the stories section green; NSFW stories could be highlighted in a different colour to make it obvious.

5.1.4 *Helping people connect more easily with matches but not blocking those who do not fit filters.* Participants were broadly in favour of the filtering mechanisms in *Providing more control over who can find and message you* (4.2.1, Figure 4). Some participants appreciated the ability to restrict those who do not match their filters to interact with them. The main reasoning was that it could help save them time and improve their experiences. For example, one participant liked that this would enable them to block anyone just looking for hookups. On the other hand, a participant who uses Grindr solely to find hookups did not see a benefit in the concept.

However, there were concerns over how aggressive the filtering could be. While the design of *Providing more control over who can find and message you* (4.2.1, see Figure 4c) sends all messages from people a user has not interacted with to a "Requests" tab, participants disagreed with whether this was a desirable approach or not. There was a broad consensus, however, that message requests should only appear for those who do not match one's filters. Some thought that separating message requests would mean that they were likely to miss new requests and preferred that they be shown alongside regular conversation threads in the main tab. Others appreciated keeping message requests separate and thought that they might occasionally check to see any from those outside their filters.

Similar to concerns raised about overzealously filtering out content or other people discussed in section 5.3.3, there was also a desire to be able to see how restrictive the filters they select are.

"I would love some transparency over how much of the, for lack of a better word field, I'm excluding by filtering in whatever way I am." [Evaluation session three]

Part of the desire to keep message requests alongside existing conversation threads was an awareness of the many discreet profiles that exist on Grindr. While participants expressed that blank or discreet profiles can have a bad reputation on the app, they noted that many have privacy concerns related to being identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community. They saw it as important to support their use of the app and worried that showing message requests separately would make it more difficult for discreet users of the app to interact with others.

Similarly, many participants recognised that there could be benefits to people who do not match their exact filters interacting with them.

"Do these explicit filters that cut people out change the dynamic of Grindr to being not just a place where you meet people or explore things that you might not have been entirely open to? But because that one person who doesn't maybe fit all of your preconceived filters, but does fit what you find attractive slips through,

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would this then stop that from happening?" [Evaluation session two]

5.1.5 Limiting repeated messages could be beneficial. Participants had mixed feelings about *Block repeated messages*(4.1.2, Figure 3). A number expressed their disdain for often receiving repeat messages from people they have not responded to. Feeling that manually blocking people entirely could be too harsh, some thought this would stop them from receiving annoying repeat messages in a nicer way.

In contrast to participants' thoughts on wanting others to see both their general expectations and those that have been signalled to them in particular as part of *Signalling what you are looking for*(4.2.2, Figure 5) (see section 5.1.2), it was thought that telling participants that they had been blocked as in *Block repeated messages*(4.1.2, see Figure 3c) might be unnecessarily harsh. However, participants in multiple evaluation sessions suggested that a nudge from *Grindr Bot*(4.3.1, see Figure 6c) that asks users if they are sure they want to send a repeated message could be helpful.

Similar to other mockups (see section 5.3.3), some participants had concerns about an automated filter restricting messages that they actually wanted to receive. For example, some participants shared that they are bad at keeping on top of messages and that even if they have not responded to someone, this does not necessarily mean they are not interested in them. Instead, some participants thought it would be more beneficial to have a mute function on Grindr, similar to other social platforms where they could mute specific people.

5.2 Providing more agency over self-presentation

In this section, we explore themes relating to participants' desires for greater affordances over the visibility of the content they post, and ways to elude visibility.

5.2.1 Allowing for greater selective visibility. Participants liked the ability to create multiple private audience lists shown in *Smart social circles*(4.4.1, Figure 7) so they could better target the audience of their posts. The way that *Smart social circles*(4.4.1, see Figure 7a) suggests a list to post to was also appreciated as a way to reduce the chances of posting to the wrong list. Participants noted, however, that there might be overlaps between groups and that it would be good to be able to share something to multiple lists.

A suggested improvement for *Smart social circles*(4.4.1, Figure 7) was to add a way to exclude specific people from seeing their content as well. Currently, Instagram allows people to be blocked from seeing all of one's stories, but this would do so for particular stories. Similarly, some participants suggested that there should also be an option to restrict screenshots.

"my parents are pretty transphobic and I want to post something that's trans-related, but I want everyone except my mom to see it." [Evaluation session two]

There were concerns, however, about the amount of effort it may take to manage lists. Additionally, some participants highlighted that they might create lists for more mundane content they did not want to "spam" everyone with. They suggested an option to make lists publicly visible so that any of their followers could opt-in.

"So you can post on your public story and be like, 'Hey, if you want to join this story to find out more about what video game I'm playing or how I'm doing with my mental health or whatever, then feel free to join that.' So perhaps to have certain lists that can be joined by public and other lists that you have to control and be added to in order to actually see what's on there." [Evaluation session three]

5.2.2 Providing ways to elude visibility. Throughout discussions of concepts, participants noted ways in which they wanted more ability to elude visibility.

In discussions around *Providing more control over who can find and message you*(4.2.1, Figure 4) participants highlighted that they were often reluctant to view people's profiles on Grindr. By default, the app alerts people when someone has opened their profile through a "Viewed Me" list shown in the title bar of the app. One participant suggested that this is particularly problematic when trying to ascertain what someone is looking for to see if they are compatible. However, while participants could be reluctant to trigger the notification for other users, some shared how they appreciated being able to see who had viewed them. As a way around this, they suggested the main grid view of profiles (see Figure 4a) in Grindr show icons that indicate what someone is looking for.

As discussed in section 5.1.2, participants noted the importance of supporting those who wish to be discreet and elude being identifiable to other users before interacting. Also discussed is the way that *Signalling what you are looking for*(4.2.2, Figure 5) could support this by allowing people to specify a more conservative version of what they are looking for on their profile and communicate the full story to a specific user they interact with.

Participants liked the ability to explore in *Suggested topics*(4.5.1, Figure 9). However, they raised concerns about whether others would be able to see what they were looking at.

"Don't make it public. Like right now if I follow an hashtag [on Instagram], you can see what I am following, which I don't mind. I don't have anything to hide. But some people, again, in some places of the world, do not want to be shown [as] following LGBT" [Evaluation session one]

Similarly, one participant noted that many people have main Instagram accounts and separate accounts where they are more happy to follow others who post NSFW content. He thought that *Focus modes for content feeds*(4.4.2, Figure 8) could help consolidate these Instagram accounts, however, he noted that an important function of people using separate accounts in this way is obscuring who one is following from the audience of the main account. Accordingly, he emphasised that *Focus modes for content feeds*(4.4.2, Figure 8) should be designed in a way that allows users to elude visibility.

5.3 Providing transparency and control over automated, algorithmic and AI features

In this section, we present participant responses to automatic, algorithmic and AI features in the mockups.

"This is the kind of experience I want to have"

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5.3.1 *Providing control over algorithmic content feeds.* Participants generally liked the concept of *Focus modes for content feeds*(4.4.2, Figure 8), which would provide them with more agency over how algorithms present content to them. A common sentiment was that user-tuned algorithms would be better at presenting content that they wanted to see. Accordingly, the ability for user customisation was popular when discussing *Focus modes for content feeds*(4.4.2, Figure 8).

"I really like that you can customise each of those categories even further. It's not just what Instagram thinks is positive vibes, it's what you specifically want when you select that tab." [Evaluation session three]

While not the original intention of *Suggested topics*(4.5.1, see Figure 9b), some participants saw its network view as a way to visualise the model being used to generate the algorithmic content feeds they see. Similarly, participants in the first evaluation session wanted a way to see judgements of interest made by platforms and correct them.

"I'd love to know, or I'd love to even just be more conscious in what kind of subcultures I'm not interested in participating in, or ones that I want to subscribe to more. And having a networked way of seeing it." [Evaluation session three]

Participants appreciated that the design of *Focus modes for content feeds*(4.4.2, Figure 8) would allow them to alter their algorithm dynamically to suit their mood.

"I think that it's such a dream that we'd be able to go into a platform and be like, "This is the kind of experience I want to have on here today"" [Evaluation session three]

This could be beneficial when wanting to explore beyond what their algorithm was presenting them. For example, some participants also saw *Focus modes for content feeds*(4.4.2, Figure 8) as a way to influence the algorithm when they got bored. Similarly, participants liked the way *Suggested topics*(4.5.1, Figure 9) could provide new ways to explore content and some thought that it could help them grow by exposing them to informational content.

"It's kind of nice to be able to choose what rabbit-hole you go down... and if I keep scrolling down after I click on that, I find more of what I want. It's an easier way I think to, I think Instagram has such issues with the search engine." [Evaluation session three]

Part of the rationale for *Focus modes for content feeds*(4.4.2, Figure 8) was that it could allow users to create what participants in the first co-design workshop referred to as a "mental health algorithm". Participants in the evaluation sessions agreed that it could be helpful for their mental health, and some thought that it would help make the app less addictive.

"I think it would be great, especially if like you're in the like down the like oh I don't want to see abs today I want to see kittens" [Evaluation session two]

On the other hand, some participants highlighted that they often enjoy seeing what the algorithm presents them and that they would likely alternate between using a targeted focus mode and not.

"I like the randomness of going on there and then whatever comes. Sometimes it is nice to see what your friends are doing, because you might get distracted by [algorithmic posts]. So I like both." [Evaluation session one]

5.3.2 *Using AI to support understanding.* Participants particularly liked the way *Grindr Bot*(4.3.1, see Figure 6b) could support understanding. They saw it as especially beneficial in helping new users understand the culture of the app and the slang that people use. Beyond this, participants also saw *Grindr Bot*(4.3.1, Figure 6) as a way for people to get support by connecting them to local services and community, similar to what was shown in *Local Guide*(4.5.2, see Figure 10a) to providing a virtual companion.

"a lot of people don't have a support circle, like friends, [if they're] in the closet and they don't have a support circle and this could be it for them... like it would just be like a friend that you can just talk to, ask questions." [Evaluation session one]

While some appreciated the way *Grindr Bot*(4.3.1, see Figure 6c) could prompt users before doing something that could be disrespectful, others had a strong preference for the feature to be passive and only respond to user questions. They thought that prompts could become annoying and were concerned that they would be co-opted for marketing purposes.

Beyond the functionality of *Grindr Bot*(4.3.1, Figure 6) shown, participants had ideas for how to improve it. Some did not want *Grindr Bot*(4.3.1, Figure 6) to appear alongside conversations with other users as they thought it could create clutter. However, this did not necessarily indicate a dislike for the feature. One such participant wanted it to be ever present in the interface for easy access. Participants also suggested ways that *Grindr Bot*(4.3.1, Figure 6) might help them navigate the app. One thought it could help him search for people contextually, for example, by showing him all the profiles he interacted with when in a specific city.

While participants saw *Grindr Bot*(4.3.1, Figure 6) as beneficial, some expressed concerns about how accurate its responses would be. They noted that there can be great geographical variation in how people communicate and that its responses may not be adequately localised. There was also a suggestion that those who might need *Grindr Bot*(4.3.1, Figure 6) the most to understand the use of slang or emoji, might also be those who struggle the most to use it. Finally, one person had concerns about *Grindr Bot*(4.3.1, Figure 6) sharing right-wing content. Some also raised privacy concerns about *Grindr Bot*(4.3.1, Figure 6).

"I don't trust any of the information that I give to these platforms. Especially if I'm talking to one of their bots. Like private messages I have some sort of expectation of confidentiality. They're probably skimming my information... But when I'm talking to one of their bots, I know that they're going to be collecting all that information." [Evaluation session two]

5.3.3 *Concerns about automatic, algorithmic or AI filtering and classification.* A common concern from participants was about trusting automated features to make the right decisions for them. While

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in favour of *New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics*(4.1.1, Figure 2), they raised concerns over how accurate the automated detection of NSFW content might be. Some participants also noted variations in what people might consider to be NSFW and suggested that if the algorithm was just looking for nudity in images, it might miss content that is confronting in other ways.

For some features, transparency over algorithmic features could help alleviate concerns. For example, participants thought that the automated detection of NSFW pictures in *New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics*(4.1.1, Figure 2) would be acceptable if there was an option to report photos for manual review.

Similarly, there were concerns that the classification of content that *Focus modes for content feeds*(4.4.2, Figure 8) relies on may cause issues.

"I feel like there's a lot of trust in the platform's ability to categorise this content. Comedy for one is subjective based on who you are, where you are based. Is it satirical? Is it a political jab? Or is it comedy?" [Evaluation session three]

Some participants suggested that users could be made to classify their own content but acknowledged that this would create extra labour. On the other hand, participants also had concerns about *Focus modes for content feeds*(4.4.2, Figure 8) relying on users to accurately classify their own content.

"So maybe I want to limit what [I] don't want to see, but then... a lot of people use random hashtags. So they're probably going to be using those. I'm going to watch an editorial or some anime reel, and I'm going to see people tagging that as politics, because they just wanted to have the most views. But then if I do say no politics, then I don't see it." [Evaluation session one]

Some highlighted concerns about *Focus modes for content feeds*(4.4.2, Figure 8) creating echo chambers that would reinforce divisions between people. Others worried that if they set up *Focus modes for content feeds*(4.4.2, Figure 8) to be too narrow, that it could unintentionally filter content they would have wanted to see. Participants raised similar concerns about filters in *Providing more control over who can find and message you*(4.2.1, Figure 4) being too narrow (see section 5.1.4) and about *Block repeated messages*(4.1.2, Figure 3) blocking messages that they would actually want (see section 5.1.5).

Participants also noted concerns about the accuracy of *Grindr Bot*(4.3.1, see Figure 6c) nudges. While seen as positive in some cases, participants noted that such an automated system could misidentify what is happening and provide inappropriate feedback.

"The prompt that comes up when you're about to do something that may not be respectful, that could be annoying and especially as I was just saying like if your sort of kink is to be degraded or something like that, then obviously that's going to come up a lot." [Evaluation session three]

5.4 Providing ways to connect with local communities

Participants liked *Local Guide*(4.5.2, Figure 10) and saw it as a helpful concept for finding connection to local communities whether at home or when travelling.

5.4.1 Helping people find their footing in the community or when travelling. Participants highlighted how *Local Guide*(4.5.2, Figure 10) could be helpful when travelling.

"I would definitely use [Local Guide]. I think 10 out of 10. It would be like Google Maps but like queer. There's no app that has the people. It has the local people right now. And like the information, events, that's so important because you arrive from any city and you want to go out, hang out, meet new people but you don't know what the locals use for events." [Evaluation session one]

Participants also saw the benefit of being able to use *Local Guide*(4.5.2, Figure 10) at home. Some thought that it would be particularly useful for those who have had little exposure to the local queer community.

"I think it's good, especially in a regional sense, some people are quite isolated generally. So being able to see where they can find community, where they can reach out to people, where there's a safe space and where there's support." [Evaluation session three]

Participants had a number of ideas for extending *Local Guide*(4.5.2, Figure 10) and *Grindr Bot*(4.3.1, Figure 6) to provide local knowledge. Some thought that it should provide safety information about places that are safe to visit and areas to avoid. Similarly, participants discussed how *Grindr Bot*(4.3.1, Figure 6) could allow someone to ask "I'm visiting this area, what's happening?". In addition, they thought that it could also provide local knowledge about the "vibes" of different venues.

The map view of *Local Guide*(4.5.2, see Figure 10b) for exploring where to go was popular. To improve it, participants suggested a filter to show different kinds of queer establishments. They also suggested features that would provide information about where people were, for example, a heat map showing where users of the app were congregating or indicators of how busy venues were. Participants thought that such features could be useful if travelling and unsure where to go but also at home when deciding where to go. However, some also raised privacy concerns.

"I would be concerned. I feel like that leads to potential hate crimes and stuff. It's like, okay, there's a lot of queers in this district, let's target them. So I feel like that could potentially be a negative use of that, but I see the benefit from, for me, like, I want to see where queers are." [Evaluation session three]

Participants also suggested ways that users could play more active roles in *Local Guide*(4.5.2, Figure 10). Adding the ability to leave reviews was suggested, as was functionality for allowing people to connect over attendance at events.

"members of the app can actually comment, suggest. Yeah. Because I think it would be more trusted if it's

"This is the kind of experience I want to have"

coming from a queer source like Grindr, like you know, then like anything that is general to the public, like Google" [Evaluation session one]

Participants saw the separation between locals and everyone else in *Local Guide*(4.5.2, see Figure 10c) as overly binary and unneeded. However, some participants liked the ability to find those who were open to exploring new places with them. One participant commented on how much they liked the idea of being able to "fellow travellers" while others suggested that people could opt-in to being displayed as "guides" for those visiting.

5.4.2 Supporting a wide range of interests. The mockups for *Local Guide*(4.5.2, Figure 10) show real information that was found in online listings found when searching for queer venues and events. However, some participants highlighted that the listings shown were very much focused on the dominant scene for queer men, and they wanted it to show a broader range. In the third evaluation session, one participant shared how he has recently joined a local queer sports team and suggested the inclusion of community and sporting organisations into *Local Guide*(4.5.2, Figure 10). Similarly, one participant noted that the topics provided in *Suggested topics*(4.5.1, Figure 9) could be expanded, and some talked about wanting it to surface content related to community groups.

"I feel like a lot of these things are related to the scene. I don't go to [the main local queer event]. It's not my thing. And then a lot of the things that come up are either gay clubs or drag queens. Some of my friends, we don't really... It doesn't interest us. [Talking about Suggested Topics.] I love history but I also like things other than queer history. So a diversity of options I think would be good." [Evaluation session one]

6 DISCUSSION

Our study adds to the small but growing body of work that involves LGBTQ+ participants in design-led research exploring how to improve social platform experiences. Our findings reveal a number of ways that social platform design could be improved and a strong desire from participants to have more agency over their experiences. We now offer considerations for design based on our findings. As noted in the introduction, work with queer and trans communities can enlighten how technology is designed and understood for all [14, 17]. While we base these considerations on our work with queer young men, they may be transferable to other groups, although it is beyond the scope of evidence in this paper.

6.1 Designing to improve consent over NSFW content

The mockups that gave users more agency over receiving NSFW pictures and signalling expectations to others were consistently among the most popular concepts in the evaluation sessions. This highlights, similar to the findings of others [19, 32, 52], that there are issues with consent in the current designs of social platforms that need to be addressed. *New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics*(4.1.1, Figure 2) and *Signalling what you are looking for*(4.2.2, Figure 5) both offer design solutions that would give users more agency to assert their preferences over receiving NSFW content, and

which were popular with participants. However, similar to findings by Zytka and Furlo [51], participants did express concerns around the timing of *Signalling what you are looking for*(4.2.2, Figure 5), highlighting an area for future design work.

While consent has often been discussed in the context of unsolicited explicit pictures that are sent directly (e.g. [19, 46]), consent in situations where content is posted publicly or to a restricted audience on someone's profile, has received less attention. Features for restricting the visibility of self-presentations are most often designed from the perspective of the person sharing content – left out is the perspective of the person who sees these curated presentations (e.g. [9, 35]). While this may be benign in cases where it pertains to non-explicit content, when these features are used to share sexually explicit content to curated audiences, consent becomes a concern. While *Smart social circles*(4.4.1, Figure 7) offered a new feature for users to opt-out of being on restricted stories, participants highlighted that this did not go far enough to address issues of consent. Future design work should explore features that allow users to opt-in to seeing restricted content.

6.2 Designing to support variation in desired experiences

A number of the concepts explored how social platforms could be designed in ways that adapted users' experiences situationally. For example, participants appreciated how *Signalling what you are looking for*(4.2.2, Figure 5) would afford them the ability to signal what they were looking for with specific users. Similarly, participants wanted to be able to communicate in their dating app profiles what they were looking for in the moment separately to what they are generally. Currently, many social platforms are designed in ways that only afford static profiles or user preferences, but participant responses to these concepts suggest that this is not adequate.

Supporting variation in desired experiences should also extend to users' motivations for using apps. For example, as prior work on dating apps has found, those who are seeking more than hookups are often at a disadvantage and have more negative experiences [48, 52]. It is not surprising, therefore, that the participants who were not interested in hookups were those most in favour of concepts such as *Providing more control over who can find and message you*(4.2.1, Figure 4) and *New settings for accepting or blocking NSFW pics*(4.1.1, Figure 2). Given that issues of consent and sexual violence are prevalent on dating apps [19, 52], features that afford users more control over who can interact with them are important for safety reasons. On the other hand, our findings highlight that some users appreciate being able to be contacted even by those who do not match their filters and do not want their experiences on dating apps such as Grindr to be sanitised.

Beyond dating apps, concepts that would afford participants more control over the content they see were also popular. Im et al. [32], in their work around applying affirmative consent to social platform design, suggested that users should be regularly asked what they want to see on a given platform. However, our findings suggest that in addition to consenting to seeing different types of content, features that allow users to customise what they see in a given situation, similar to *Focus modes for content feeds*(4.4.2,

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Figure 8) are valuable. For example, they did not want explicit content to appear when looking at social platforms on the bus, even if in a different context they were happy to see them.

6.3 Using AI in ways that support user understanding or exploration

While participants appreciated the use of features that relied on AI in some contexts, there were concerns about features that relied on them to make decisions for users or to classify content. As Yildirim et al. [49] found in their research, it is common for designers to envision new concepts that require near-perfect model performance and that would be difficult to build. Similarly, some participants in the evaluation sessions had concerns that features relying on classification would not be accurate enough for them to want to use them. In some cases, they thought this could be mitigated by allowing oversight, for example, being able to flag content for manual review. However they were wary of features that would automatically block others from interacting with them or limit the content they saw. Designers of AI-based features for social platforms should be aware of the limitations of the models they rely on and provide transparency to users.

On the other hand, participants seemed to appreciate uses of AI that would support understanding. For example, similar to prior findings by [48], they thought that dating apps could be overwhelming and an AI assistant like *Grindr Bot*(4.3.1, Figure 6) could be helpful. Similarly, while participants had concerns over how classification could work as part of *Focus modes for content feeds*(4.4.2, Figure 8), the ability to explore using *Suggested topics*(4.5.1, Figure 9) was popular. This suggests that AI-based features that offer contextual support to users or aid exploration will be more popular with users than those that provide automated classification or filtering.

6.4 Limitations

Our work is based on engagements with 13 queer men working in technology design and 15 end users. They are, therefore, limited in the extent to which they can be generalised across wider populations. While all LGBTQ+ young people may have similar experiences in some ways due to heteronormativity, there are nuances in experiences between subgroups which impact the transferability of findings based solely on queer and trans young men to the wider community. Similarly, the evaluations and the previous study that informed the co-design workshops were situated in a specific geographic context, a metropolitan area in Australia with fairly accepting attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people. While queer and trans young men in other areas with similar cultures and attitudes may share similar experiences, this impacts the transferability of findings to areas where being LGBTQ+ is more highly stigmatised.

7 CONCLUSION

This paper presents mockups of new social platform features based on co-design workshops with queer men working in technology design and findings from evaluation sessions with queer young men. In doing so, we extend prior work around LGBTQ+ young people on social platforms through a design-led approach that explores how their experiences could be improved. We find that participants greatly appreciated features that gave them more agency

over their experiences, especially where they support consent. Additionally, participants liked features that would provide them more control over their visibility and connect them to community. While participants had mixed reactions to automated features, they appreciated the use of AI-based features to support understanding and exploration. Our work suggests the need for social platforms to be designed in ways that better support consent, allow for variation in user preferences and situations and use automated features in ways that are mindful of user desires for agency.

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