

“it allows me to be ‘me’”: Self-presentation, authenticity, and affordances among LGBTQ+ social media users

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Abstract

LGBTQ+ social media users face many choices regarding their identity and self-presentation. We examined how feelings of authentic identity performances on social media involve social affordances using an online survey of LGBTQ+ individuals (N =159) who responded to open-ended questions about their social media use and self-presentation. Results of our thematic analysis indicated that LGBTQ+ users perceive tensions between communicating authentic versus inauthentic self-representations on social media and that feeling (in)authentic can be understood through social affordances. Whereas personalization and anonymity were described as enabling authenticity, editability and privacy affordances were described as inhibiting authenticity. Other affordances, including conversation control, persistence, social presence, and network association were tension-filled, supporting and constraining authenticity depending on how the user perceived them. We discuss our findings and implications concerning future research directions regarding affordances and self-presentation.

Keywords: Social media, identity, authenticity, social affordances, LGBTQ

As of 2022, 72% of Americans use social networking sites (SNS) to connect with others, get daily news, share information and opinions, and entertain themselves (Pew Research Center, 2022). In 2013, Pew Research Center reported that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+) Americans were especially avid SNS users, with 80% using Facebook or Twitter compared to 58% of the general population. Although this research has yet to be updated over the past decade, SNS usage has been on the rise generally. LGBTQ+ individuals are commonly motivated to utilize online networks to find support and connect with similar others (Craig et al., 2015a; Gray, 2009). Many LGBTQ+ individuals not only regard digital communities as safer and more supportive than offline environments (Brown et al., 2005; Craig et al., 2015b) but also suggest that queer online representations are more authentic and dynamic than traditional media portrayals (McInroy & Craig, 2017). Despite these claims, research has thus far demonstrated a tension between perceived authenticity, self-presentation, and individual experiences with technology (i.e., social affordances) among queer SNS users.

In general, perceived self-authenticity in both offline and online spaces is related to increased well-being (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014), and greater coherence between one's "true self" and the self an individual presents on SNS has been associated with higher social connectedness and lower stress (Grieve & Watkinson, 2016). However, LGBTQ+ individuals might feel unable to openly share their identities offline for fear of facing stigma or negative repercussions (Miller, 2016) and are less likely to feel authentic on SNS or experience benefits from authenticity (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014). As such, it is essential to consider self-presentation and perceptions of self-authenticity across SNS, as well as the relationship between LGBTQ+ SNS users and social affordances. To this end, we examine the role of social affordances in how LGBTQ+ individuals experience SNS as enabling or inhibiting their presentation of an "authentic" self.

Every SNS user has numerous self-presentation options, and affordances are likely related to how users enact or perceive authenticity in online spaces. Although affordances that enable or constrain authenticity on SNS might be particularly salient for LGBTQ+ individuals who cannot share their identities offline and often use SNS to explore their identities (Craig et al., 2015a; Miller, 2016), our study results and implications extend across contexts. The following sections review pertinent literature, describe our study methods, and present our thematic findings. We conclude by contextualizing our results alongside social affordance research and offering implications for extending scholarship on LGBTQ+ individuals, identity, and SNS self-presentation.

Authenticity and Self-Presentation Across SNS

Identity is a self-performance tailored for a specific audience or group (Altheide, 2000). Although identity is commonly discussed and conceptualized in terms of binaries and experienced as relatively-fixed constructs, scholars agree that identities are complex, fluid, and crystallized (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). The idea of the "crystallized self" acknowledges the many facets that make up one's sense of self and impression management (e.g., our diverse interests, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and roles that might shift or become salient in the different spaces we occupy; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). The symbolic interactionist view of identity acknowledges that identities are full of tensions, contradictions, and nuances. Nevertheless, individuals expect others to be authentic and perform a coherent self across contexts, deeming identity deviations inauthenticity (Fernandez, 2021). The tension between performing an authentic and coherent yet crystallized self has particularly interesting implications for SNS users and queer communities.

SNS can be fixed or flexible depending on the user's network ties, technological selections, and usage patterns (e.g., using pseudonyms and blocking corporeal connections). Some networks introduce rigidity to identity performances because they are "fixed" and include individuals' corporeal connections (e.g., offline, Facebook, and LinkedIn interactions), whereas other "flexible" networks allow for identity performances separate from corporeal connections and bodies (e.g., online communities that facilitate anonymous communication; McEwan, 2015, p. 38). Although many identity performances take place somewhere along the fixed-flexible continuum, LGBTQ+ users often use fully flexible networks such as anonymous online forums (e.g., Tumblr and Reddit) or alternate accounts (e.g., Fake

Instagram or “Finsta”) to dabble in myriad identity performances (Coker, 2022), learn from other queer users (Bond et al., 2009; Fox & Ralston, 2016), and create supportive relationships (Gray, 2009) apart from their offline connections that might expect rigid and consistent identity performances. At the same time, users also engage in relatively fixed networks, such as personal SNS accounts (Craig & McNroy, 2014), to engage in identity work, such as coming out or seeking offline connections. In any case, LGBTQ+ SNS users often cite authenticity and realistic representations as helpful to learning from similar others across SNS (Gray, 2009; McNroy & Craig, 2017). Although SNS provide queer users with the ability to manufacture and experience support with “real people” (McNroy & Craig, 2017), performing an intelligible and coherent self across SNS is a delicate experience (Fernandez, 2021).

Despite the benefits of SNS and related potential affordances for learning about queer identities (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Kitzie, 2019), performing an authentic self can be challenging for LGBTQ+ individuals. Specifically, performing intelligible selves across audiences can increase emotional labor (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015) and necessitate that LGBTQ+ users make difficult choices about their identity performances (Fernandez, 2021). Balancing the pressure to perform intelligible selves with other minority stressors (e.g., safety, grappling with identity performances, being outed) complicates self-presentation for LGBTQ+ individuals in online spaces and, consequently, feelings of authenticity or inauthenticity. Conceptualizing and understanding LGBTQ+ individuals’ varied SNS experiences requires attention to the different factors (e.g., platforms, features, offline experiences) that shape users’ identity performances and experiences of authenticity. Examining these experiences within the context of social affordances provides insight into users’ experiences (e.g., Fox & Ralston, 2016; Kitzie, 2019), such as their identity performances and feelings of authenticity across their networks, audiences, and SNS rather than limiting findings to discrete platforms.

Social Affordances

Social affordances are challenging to define, although scholars generally conceptualize affordances as the relationship among the user, object, and feature (Evans et al., 2017; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Specifically, Evans et al. define affordances as a “multifaceted relational structure between an object/technology and the user that enables or constrains potential behavioral outcomes in a particular context” (2017, p. 36). Although Gibson’s (1979) early conceptualization of affordances was based on the inherent properties of an object, scholars have shifted to assessing affordances based on the user’s experience (Fox & McEwan, 2017; Norman, 1990). In this sense, users may perceive an object’s properties differently than the intended purpose. Because affordances are co-constructed by the object and the actor, personal characteristics such as a queer identity and related motivations for using SNS are important considerations.

Fox and McEwan (2017) identified 10 social affordances of communication channels: anonymity, editability, privacy, personalization, network association, social presence, channel synchronicity, conversation control, persistence, and accessibility. *Anonymity* (the ability to remain unknown to others; Fox & McEwan, 2017), *editability* (the ability to revise specific messages to varying degrees; Treem

& Leonardi, 2013), and *privacy* (the degree to which an individual or communication is visible to others; Treem & Leonardi, 2013) can allow users to better control the information they communicate to others by allowing the users to remain unknown, edit or delete their messages, and limit the information to which others have access. Similarly, *conversation control* refers to the ability to manage interactions, such as ending a conversation or reciprocating turns (Feaster, 2010; Fox & McEwan, 2017). These affordances could help LGBTQ+ individuals feel free to portray themselves more openly or authentically on SNS. In contrast, SNS messages have varying degrees of *persistence*, or permanence (Treem & Leonardi, 2013) that might make LGBTQ+ individuals cautious with what they post.

Channels also vary by how much they allow *personalization*, or the ability to direct a message to a specific individual or group (Daft et al., 1987; Wellman et al., 2003). Adjusting one's message depending on the audience might help users feel more authentic by reducing the need to worry about how unintended others might receive their messages. Similarly, channels vary in the extent to which individuals are visible and connected to other network members. This *network association* affordance (Fox & McEwan, 2017) could also affect how individuals present themselves on SNS. How individuals are linked to their offline network or supportive groups might enable or constrain their self-presentation. Together, affordances impact the closeness interactants feel to one another as they share a mediated experience, commonly known as *social presence* (Fox & McEwan, 2017). *Channel synchronicity*, or the amount to which a communication exchange is delayed because of a lag between message transmission (e.g., email), influences the feelings of social presence (Fox & McEwan, 2017). Lastly, technology has enabled users to access "communication regardless of time, place, structural limitations, technological literacy, other constraints," (Fox & McEwan, 2017, p. 304) known as *accessibility*.

Just as affordances provide LGBTQ+ individuals the opportunity to participate in safe online learning and teaching (Fox & Ralston, 2016), it is likely true that affordances are implicated in how LGBTQ+ individuals experience and enact online authenticity. Because affordances are co-constructed by the object and the actor, personal characteristics such as a queer identity and related motivations for using SNS are important considerations. As such, we aim to extend scholarship on LGBTQ+ online community participation, self-presentation, and authenticity by exploring how LGBTQ+ individuals' perceptions of social affordances shape their experience of feeling authentic. Specifically, we ask:

RQ1: To what extent do LGBTQ+ SNS users experience authentic self-presentation across social media?

RQ2: How do social affordances enable and/or constrain feelings of authenticity among LGBTQ+ SNS users?

Method

Participants

Eligible participants identified as LGBTQ+, were at least 18, and spoke English. One hundred and sixty-nine individuals opened the survey; however, 10 submissions were removed due to incomplete responses, leaving 159 participants. Participants self-identified as female/cisgender woman ($n = 116, 73\%$), nonbinary/agender ($n = 20, 12.6\%$), genderfluid ($n = 15, 9.4\%$), male/cisgender man ($n = 5,$

3.1%), and transgender man ($n = 3$, 1.9%). Regarding their sexual orientation, participants reported identifying as bisexual ($n = 76$, 47.8%), lesbian ($n = 38$, 23.9%), pansexual ($n = 13$, 8.2%), asexual ($n = 12$, 7.5%), queer ($n = 11$, 6.9%), gay ($n = 10$, 6.3%), and demisexual ($n = 4$, 2.5%). Participants could write in more than one sexual orientation (e.g., queer demisexual), so percentages do not sum to 100%. Participants ranged from 18 to 46 years old ($M = 21.9$, $SD = 3.74$).

Our participants began using SNS as young as eight years old ($M = 12.5$ years). Tumblr was the most popular SNS among our participants ($n = 134$, 84.3%), followed by Instagram ($n = 112$, 70.4%), Facebook ($n = 97$, 61%), YouTube ($n = 91$, 57.2%), Twitter ($n = 75$, 47.2%), Pinterest ($n = 28$, 17.6%), and LiveJournal ($n = 2$, 1.2%). Nineteen participants also used "other" SNS (11.9%). Participants indicated they used three SNS platforms ($n = 48$, 30.2%), four SNS platforms ($n = 38$, 23.9%), five or more SNS platforms ($n = 38$, 23.9%), two SNS platforms ($n = 25$, 15.7%), and one SNS platform ($n = 10$, 6.3%). Most of our participants (93.7%) indicated they used more than one SNS platform, emphasizing the utility of our affordance framework for exploring how users' relationships with their SNS shape their self-presentation.

Procedures

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, we recruited participants using network, snowball, and purposeful sampling. The study recruitment message was posted on two of the authors' social media accounts and LGBTQ+ Facebook groups; those who saw the message were encouraged to share it with their networks. The recruitment message included information about the study, eligibility requirements, and a link to an online questionnaire. Since our study aimed to gain a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences, perspectives, and attitudes regarding their self-presentation, an online questionnaire was appropriate for gathering such descriptive data (Nassaji, 2015). Furthermore, in studies investigating sensitive material, such as sexual orientation, online questionnaires are more likely to gather genuine emotions and decrease inhibition (Hanna et al., 2005; Huang, 2006).

The survey began with a virtual informed consent page that also instructed participants to answer the survey questions to the best of their ability. Participants could skip any question or leave the study at any time. Data collection occurred over one week, and participants responded at their convenience. Participants were not compensated for their participation.

To begin, participants completed a set of questions gauging their SNS use, including what SNS individuals first started using the internet and what SNS they used at the time of the survey. Then, we asked participants eight questions about their perceptions of social media concerning their experiences of identity, community, and benefits/drawbacks. The present manuscript draws from data provided by our participants' experiences of authenticity on SNS (i.e., "Do you feel more or less "authentic" on SNS than you do in "real life?" Please explain how you feel and what makes you feel that way.") and decisions to express their identity across SNS (i.e., "Has any of this impacted your decision to have your identity on the sites or want to become anonymous? Please explain either way).

Data Analysis

Although our interpretations were sensitized by a social affordance framework and social identity theory, our initial analysis was grounded in the data. Our analysis and findings were guided by particular subjectivities, such as theoretical lenses and related assumptions about LGBTQ+ SNS usage (e.g., identity development and performance, well-being, and social affordances). As typical in qualitative inquiry, we paired these subjectivities with self-reflexivity (Tracy, 2020) to strengthen our inquiry and better understand the interplays between our participants' experiences of authenticity and SNS usage.

First, we approached our data inductively by performing a thematic analysis—identifying patterns of meaning in qualitative data—following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Our initial thematic analysis was grounded in the data but sensitized by our collective understanding of SNS and LGBTQ+ identity. Thematic analysis was appropriate for the current project because it is exploratory; our project aimed to understand how LGBTQ+ individuals perceived their authentic self-presentation in online spaces.

We individually read and re-read the survey responses, made notes of our early thoughts and impressions, and highlighted interesting data before meeting to discuss our initial categories and agree on potential themes. As we conducted our initial thematic analysis, we simultaneously conducted a qualitative content analysis (Tracy, 2020) by counting the number of participants who described feeling more or less authentic on SNS than in real life. Whereas most participants explicitly noted they felt more or less authentic on SNS than in real life, some responses were less clear (e.g., "I have different personas." and "My online presence is quite sparse."). We compared our categorizations, discussed cases we were uncertain of, and resolved to have three categories to fully represent our respondents' experiences of authenticity on SNS in comparison to real life: more authentic, less authentic, and other (e.g., similarly authentic, ambivalent, not enough data provided). At this point, we also agreed that our thematic analyses yielded similar findings: Participants frequently discursively referenced social affordances in their responses when discussing perceived authenticity. Given this initial thematic finding, we reviewed the literature on social affordances, selected an affordance framework to guide our analysis (Fox & McEwan, 2017), and collectively reapproached our dataset to understand how our participants discussed perceived authenticity alongside the 10 affordances.

After an initial discussion of our data concerning social affordances, we individually coded the dataset again using the codebook, this time sensitized by peripheral schema (social affordances) to better understand how social affordances enabled or constrained authentic self-presentation. We reconvened to discuss the data we coded based on the pre-identified list of social affordances. We resolved all disparities through this process and subsequently arrived at eight social affordances relating to authentic self-presentation. In what follows, we expand on the eight social affordances related to LGBTQ+ users' perceptions of authentic self-presentation.

Findings

Perceived Authenticity and SNS

When participants compared their perceptions of authenticity offline and on SNS, approximately 60% of participants ($n = 94$) reported feeling more authentic when interacting, posting, and sharing via SNS than offline. Many participants who responded feeling more authentic described particular SNS as "safe spaces" where they can connect with like-minded people without the fear of judgment or ridicule. One participant stated, "... I can be myself and not have to worry about being judged and looked down upon for being queer." Another noted they felt "More authentic because it allows an environment where you can more easily seek out like-minded individuals or avoid those who would judge you for your identity."

On the other hand, those who reported feeling less authentic on SNS than in real life often feared who might see their pictures and posts online and the consequences of being their authentic self. One participant stated, "I have to pretend to not be gay but also not be straight online. Everyone knows. I'm completely out... But because I never know who is going to see a tweet about my boyfriend my safety is in jeopardy." Another noted, "it becomes a question of what is okay to share, who is going to see this post, will there be any consequences? The social media version of me is definitely filtered and doesn't show the full picture of my life." Whereas some participants suggested SNS enabled authentic self-presentation, others noted the complexities of presenting their authentic selves. Therefore, we detail how participants perceived social affordances as enabling and constraining their perceptions of authentic self-presentation across SNS.

LGBTQ+ Self-Presentation and Social Affordances

Most participants disclosed that they felt SNS supported or enabled their authentic self-presentation due to social affordances, including editability, personalization, conversation control, persistence, anonymity, privacy, social presence, and network association. Many of the affordances that enabled some participants to perceive authenticity simultaneously constrained authentic self-presentation for others. We explore these tensions in the following section relating to social affordances, marginalized identity, and self-presentation.

Editability and Personalization

Overall, participants described editability and personalization as being closely linked. Although editability and personalization were mutually shaping affordances, participants experienced the utility of these two affordances differently. Whereas many participants perceived personalization as enabling authenticity because they could curate their SNS networks, they perceived editability as central to altering and inhibiting authentic identity performances among groups of unsupportive individuals.

Some participants noted that their authentic self-presentation was enabled because they could communicate with personalized groups. For example, one participant noted, "I feel more involved in society online and that I am more valid and accepted online, as well as more connected with peers and like-minded people." Another stated, "I feel more authentic, because I can more or less choose who

"hears" my uncensored attraction to women on social media." Others noted how their audience shaped their considerations of what information they disclosed on SNS. One participant wrote,

I am more open on certain social networking sites than others. My personal situation means that any social networks where my family can see what I'm posting depict a less authentic version of myself (facebook and instagram for the most part) while others (tumblr) are away from my family and therefore I can be as open and authentic as I want.

On the other hand, some participants expressed that the mere ability to edit, change, or control their attributes on SNS made them feel less authentic. One participant shared this sentiment, saying, "I feel less authentic on social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram that mostly revolve around pictures and showing the best parts of your life." Another stated, "I feel less authentic on Instagram and Facebook because I only want to highlight the best things that happen to me..." Thus, participants agreed that editing made them feel less authentic, but their reasons for linking editability to inauthenticity differed. Whereas some participants felt that dynamic and full self-performances were inherently constrained by editability, others used editability as a tool to adapt their identities and disclosure with specific audiences, constraining their perceived authenticity while protecting them from potential harm.

Thus, personalization and editability were mutually shaping. Users who felt insecure or unsupported on a particular channel described the need to edit their message or alter the information they wanted to share. In doing so, they felt less authentic yet more coherent in the eyes of their audience. On the other hand, when users were privy to a personalized group of supportive individuals, commonly described as other LGBTQ+ users, their need for editability decreased, and their ability to perform self-perceived authentic identities increased.

Conversation Control and Persistence

Many participants expressed feeling more authentic because they controlled the information they shared and limited or blocked individuals' access to their SNS profiles. One participant expressed the freedom associated with SNS, saying,

Online, I am not afraid to say what I am feeling/who I feel like I am. I know I can easily get away from any repercussions of saying something, such as blocking people who are being rude. In real life, if I am so unapologetically "me" and people disagree with this, it is not as easy to escape.

Another participant shared that they did not feel pressure to be inauthentic: "Being online is easier because you're not face to face with one having to explain 'hey I'm bi!, let me explain why I believe i am this' Its just 'I'm bi. Don't like it? k bye.'" The ability to shut down unwanted conversations and questioning was considered unique to online spaces.

On the other hand, some noted that offline and fixed interactions afforded more conversation control and enabled more authentic self-portrayals. One participant noted,

it feels like there's a different language being used on tumblr and twitter, especially, where people understand where you're coming from even if you're truncating your thoughts. But I also find myself filtering things online sometimes, as I don't know if it's going to be taken out of context, where I can speak more freely in real

life as if it's misinterpreted it will (hopefully) eventually be forgotten and not tied to me forever.

In this example, the participant highlights a tension in controlling conversations; whereas control sometimes enabled social presence and perceived authenticity through shared language and understanding, control and persistence also made some participants scrutinize their communication to an unproductive and damaging extent.

Relatedly, participants experienced permanence differently depending on the channel. Some noted that the ephemerality of online communication and the ability to control conversations enabled them to perform perceived authentic selves. Others, however, viewed offline encounters as less permanent, noting fears of their digital footprints being traced back to them (e.g., ". . . I can speak more freely in real life as if it's misinterpreted it will (hopefully) eventually be forgotten and not tied to me forever."). In this case, offline interactions afforded more control because of the perceived ephemerality and low degree of permanence. However, some participants felt more authentic when they could not edit their past online interactions (hence, a considerable degree of permanence). For example, one participant stated that, "I feel like a lot of the people who come across my blog know a lot more about me than anyone who might happen across my physical form on any given day." Thus, whereas editability constrained authenticity because participants could alter their authentic image when communicating around unsupportive groups, permanence was viewed differently depending on the channel.

Anonymity and Privacy

Participants often expressed feeling able to share their authentic selves on SNS due to the anonymity and privacy they perceived some platforms afforded. One individual stated, "I feel more authentic on anonymous SNS (i.e., Tumblr) and less authentic on personal ones (i.e., Instagram)." Another participant stated,

I feel more authentic on SNS. That's because I share stuff about what I like. There is a lot of that stuff that I wouldn't even share in real life. I think that's the whole being able to be anonymous on the internet. Even if there's my picture as my avatar, I'm not sharing any personal information on where I live, what I'm doing or how I'm feeling at the moment. I just share my interests.

Many participants described anonymity as a primary way of accessing and presenting their authentic selves, even when other affordances constrained their authenticity. For example, one participant described feeling less authentic because "there's none of me physically on SNS other than some photos (eg. body language, voice, etc) and I don't put every detail of my life online but more authentic in some ways in that the anonymity can be freeing." Whereas participants described privacy as enabling them to pick and choose elements of their identities they revealed to their audiences, therefore constraining their perceived self-authenticity, they described anonymity as an affordance that comprehensively enabled them to portray their authentic identities because it protected them from potential harm and negative repercussions.

Network Association and Social Presence

Network association and social presence were mutually shaping perceptions of authenticity. Participants who lacked a geographically-close supportive net-

work expressed feeling closely connected to acquaintances and friends who shared similar experiences, interests, beliefs, and values on flexible SNS. Others who were close to their corporeal connections and felt supported in offline encounters felt less connected to other SNS users and more authentic in fixed environments.

For participants who experienced less closeness in fixed networks, the ability to curate an online community and feel close to self-selected users helped them present their nuanced identities and feel more authentic. Thus, rather than feeling proximal, participants described feeling experientially and interpersonally connected to fellow—and mostly anonymous—users in flexible environments.

Many participants shared sentiments such as, "...it allows an environment where you can more easily seek out like-minded individuals or avoid those who would judge you..." which enabled perceptions of authentic self-presentation. For instance, one participant stated, "I guess it allows me to be "me" more because no one knows who I really am and, in the circles I travel at least, they're more accepting of LGBT+ identities." Another participant shared how their background influenced their inability to feel authentic in offline spaces, a noteworthy precursor to many of our participants experiencing social presence among their online connections.

I grew up in a very small, conservative, Christian town, and I'm unlike them in pretty much every way. All my core friends also grew up there, and since I don't make friends easily, they're really my only friends. I don't have any IRL LGBT friends, so I can't express myself authentically around them.

Relatedly, many participants felt less authentic online when they engaged in relatively fixed networks. The more people in their network that had access to their SNS profiles or could potentially view the information posted to their profiles, the less participants felt they could express their authentic selves. One participant stated,

I do tend to try to be as authentic as possible as often as possible, but I definitely limit a lot of what I share regarding my sexuality and other aspects of myself so they don't end up getting used against me by future employers, current and potential coworkers, and the like.

Another participant expressed, "It is still very hard to express who I am on social media, as well in real life when there are people/friends/family members who do not know of my sexuality." Finally, one individual explicitly stated that their ability to express themselves is directly related to who from their network is on that SNS. They said, "It depends on the site and who I know in real life that follows me. On sites like Facebook, where I'm friends with a lot of my family I tend to censor myself quite a lot."

Feeling inauthentic around a fixed, unsupportive geographically-close social circle often motivated participants to seek support in flexible online spaces. Many of our participants described feeling safe and secure among SNS users with similar experiences, enabling them to authentically present their thoughts and perceived identity. Thus, participants who positively experienced social presence described their online relationships and self-presentation as authentic.

Others, however, felt distanced from online communities because of the judgment prevalent on SNS. For example, one participant noted, "I can be myself more in real life because I know the people I'm surrounding myself with and I am com-

fortable. Whereas online there are people that are going to be judgemental & potentially [sic] have mean comments..." As this participant demonstrated, social presence was experienced contingent upon the user's audience, the communication channel, and their relationship with their corporeal connections. However, in general, most participants described how they curated their online communities—both fixed and flexible—to be more supportive and less judgmental relative to their offline spaces.

Discussion

We sought to understand how LGBTQ+ individuals perceive authentic self-presentation in online spaces in relation to social affordances. Although it is apparent that anonymity and safety are important considerations for LGBTQ+ SNS users, LGBTQ+ individuals regularly utilize numerous social affordances, many of which are relatively less understood. As such, our exploration extends research exploring the perceptions and motivations of LGBTQ+ SNS users by understanding and emphasizing different social affordances (Fox & McEwan, 2017) salient to queer experiences.

Most of our participants (60%) described feeling more authentic in online spaces than in offline interactions. Our results confirm our understanding of LGBTQ+ representation in online spaces; not only do LGBTQ+ users perceive online spaces as helpful because of the dynamic, "real" representations of similar users (Gray, 2009; McInroy & Craig, 2017), but users also benefit from feeling more authentic themselves and developing authentic relationships. Although SNS features user-generated content and users can curate a persona, most of our participants felt they could be themselves. Although scholars have fractured the theoretical real-/fake-self dichotomy (i.e., crystalized selves; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), our participants emphasized feeling more or less authentic depending on their relationships with their audience, selves, and technology. Therefore, rather than making generalized claims about SNS or SNS features as they relate to LGBTQ+ identities (e.g., Gray, 2009; McInroy & Craig, 2017), our findings emphasize social affordances as principal considerations for exploring the extent to which SNS benefit queer users.

Our findings suggest potential avenues for continuing to understand how affordances affect identity and self-presentation. Participants identified several social affordances—aligned with Fox and McEwan's (2017) review—that supported or constrained their ability to feel authentic. Whereas personalization and anonymity were seen as enabling authenticity, editability and privacy affordances were described as inhibiting authenticity. Other affordances, including permanence, social presence, network association, and conversation control, were tension-filled, supporting and constraining authenticity depending on how the user perceived them. This finding is consistent with previous conceptualizations of social affordances, which have emphasized that affordance can be used differently or encourage different outcomes, depending on how people use it (Fox & McEwan, 2017; Evans et al., 2017).

Similarly, participants often perceived the same platform as offering different affordance levels. For example, some participants saw Twitter as affording anonymity, whereas others saw it as less anonymous. Such findings underscore the importance of understanding how LGBTQ+ individuals perceive and use specific

affordances across SNS instead of focusing solely on particular SNS or communication channels.

Personalization and anonymity reportedly enabled authentic self-presentation. Participants explained that the ability to choose what they share and limit personal information through personalized or anonymous communication helped reduce the potential repercussions of their online interactions. Although participants varied in how much personal information they were willing to share (e.g., their first name, an avatar, or particular offline interests), the feeling that they could choose which information to share was a common theme. A couple of participants had multiple accounts on the same platform, one more restricted in the audience or personal information shared and the other less private. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting people feel they can more authentically express themselves on their “fake Instagram,” or “finsta,” accounts than on their main accounts (Dewar et al., 2019) and highlights the idea that perceptions of affordances can influence behavior more than specific platform features do. Similarly, perceptions of the anonymity afforded by particular platforms varied among participants. For example, some participants cited Twitter as relatively anonymous, whereas others viewed it as lacking anonymity.

Relatedly—yet on the other hand—participants generally described privacy and editability as constraining their ability to feel authentic because they selected specific elements of their identities to perform across SNS. Whereas anonymity was described as a shield that protected participants and enabled authentic expressions, privacy and editability enabled participants to pick and choose components of their identities to make salient, and corporeal connections often made participants utilize these affordances to water down their self-perceived authentic identities. Although SNS users make decisions about their identity portrayals despite affordances, our findings highlight that privacy and editability can be experienced as affordances promoting “a la carte” identity portrayals, decreasing users’ perceived authenticity. Although our participants did not discuss editability as enabling authentic self-presentation, editability can help users present a more idealized version of themselves (Walther, 2007), and future research should explore potential tensions between curating consistent ideal identities and performing identities derived from others’ expectations. Further, although LGBTQ+ users might experience other queer SNS users as authentic and dynamic (Gray, 2009; McNroy & Craig, 2017), future research should explore the extent to which users might perceive or expect that other LGBTQ+ SNS portrayals are potentially altered by editability and privacy affordances.

The relationships between inauthenticity and the ability to edit posts, retain private information, and the permanence of their communication were often discussed in tandem with network association and personalization. Participants who felt less authentic on specific SNS cited their connections to offline friends, family, and coworkers as justification for that feeling, which shaped how they perceived permanence. Many participants indicated they were “out” to their close friends and family but not their more extensive network. In these cases, regulating self-presentation (i.e., editability and privacy) and personalizing their identity portrayals helped participants avoid potential judgment or negative consequences arising from “outing” themselves to less close contacts in relatively fixed SNS.

This strategy is similar to the "lowest common denominator" strategy of privacy management (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014) and suggests that communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002) might be helpful to further understand how LGBTQ+ individuals engage in identity and impression management on SNS.

Somewhat consistent with prior research on online disinhibition effects (Suler, 2004) and past research on LGBTQ+ SNS use (Miller, 2016), participants noted that online environments helped them share their true self because their content was flexible and impermanent. However, our data illuminated that a degree of persistence and disinhibition both enabled and constrained authentic presentation. Whereas some participants perceived that ephemerality helped them to be authentic in both fixed and flexible environments, others called attention to the non-permanence of virtual content and noted that their ability to edit information inhibited authenticity. The disinhibition either helped or harmed authenticity depending on how participants used it; participants who were uninhibited to share their identities in ephemeral and flexible spaces felt authentic, whereas participants who viewed their identity portrayals as non-permanent and editable felt less authentic.

Many participants felt SNS allowed them to connect with people with similar interests, beliefs, or identities through flexible networks. Often, these connections were among people who were physically distant but made to feel proximal via SNS. These responses represented a sense of social presence derived from feelings of similarity and acceptance. In mediated settings, immediacy, or psychological closeness, can be derived from a sense of approachability (e.g., informality, similarity, and self-disclosure) and regard (e.g., personalness and engagement; O'Sullivan et al., 2004). In the current study, a sense of social presence appeared to derive from participants' psychological closeness to similar others.

Some participants felt that social presence enabled their authentic self-performances because they experienced immediacy with similar others, underscoring claims that LGBTQ+ SNS users experience closeness in certain social groups (Craig et al., 2015b; Gray, 2009). Others described feeling more distant from individuals across SNS due to judgment and hatred. Thus, despite prevalent claims that SNS are safer than offline environments (Brown et al., 2005; Craig et al., 2015a; Fox & Ralston, 2016), our findings demonstrate that psychological safety is relative and can inhibit individuals from performing their self-perceived authentic identities. Participants could utilize flexible networks or draw on other affordances, such as personalization and conversation control, to mitigate the negative repercussions of feeling proximal to harmful dialogue.

Control over conversations with others via SNS also helped participants feel they could present themselves more openly. Participants noted that because they could quickly leave unpleasant conversations and restrict others' ability to contact them, they worried less about any potential negative ramifications of their self-presentation and communication. This finding is consistent with previous research on communication preferences in face-threatening situations (Feaster, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2000) and extends the research to potentially stigmatizing or judgmental interactions. Also noteworthy, participants seemed primarily focused on the ability to control their conversations, as opposed to actual past instances of ending conversations or blocking contacts. Although this trend might be due to the nature

of the questions in the study, the responses suggested that simply knowing they could control their conversations led participants to feel more authentic and open in their interactions with others.

Taken as a whole, our findings emphasize the relationship between users, their technology, and their technology's features (i.e., social affordances; Gibson, 1979) as salient to how LGBTQ+ users experience and express identity across SNS. Our participants' perceptions of authenticity and affordances were primarily shaped by their corporeal experiences (e.g., offline connections, experiences of acceptance, degree of outness, and feeling safe), underscoring the importance of interrogating social affordances pertaining to queer SNS users' experiences. Thus, rather than focusing on specific SNS features or describing media as a monolith that positively impacts LGBTQ+ users, scholars should contextualize LGBTQ+ SNS research alongside social affordances to advance theory and practice in meaningful directions.

Limitations and Future Research

Although our study provides insight into how individuals perceive their ability to present their authentic selves online, it also provides ample opportunities for future research. First, our sample overrepresented cisgender women relative to other gender identities, so future research should use targeted or quota sampling to examine other populations better. Second, our study was retrospective by design, asking participants to reflect on their self-presentation. Some nuances or additional information may be gained through future research investigating daily authenticity expression. Daily diaries or experience sampling (Bolger et al., 2003), in which participants are asked about when they felt they were presenting their authentic self either online or offline, could provide information regarding the frequency with which individuals engage in self-presentation activities and allow for a comparison between the behaviors enacted online and those enacted offline. Furthermore, researchers could see social affordances "in action," giving a clearer picture of how social affordances support or constrain authenticity.

Additionally, our study identified eight affordances related to self-presentation in online spaces among LGBTQ+ users. Although the current study identifies which affordances are potentially most salient to LGBTQ+ SNS users, future research could use this and other quantitative measures to explore perceptions of the other affordances. Further, participants' perceptions of these affordances were mixed. This variation is consistent with previous conceptualizations of affordances as at least partly subjective to the individual user (Evans et al., 2017; Fox & McEwan, 2017). However, although we were able to provide insight into which affordances participants perceived as supporting versus constraining authenticity, we do not have enough information to determine why participants held these views. Future research should further illuminate participants' experiences.

Conclusion

LGBTQ+ individuals often visit SNS and online communities to find support and connect with others (Craig et al., 2015a; Craig et al., 2015b), but many still struggle with how they are perceived in online environments. Our research uncovered how LGBTQ+ users perceive tensions between communicating authentic

versus inauthentic self-presentations and how feeling (in)authentic is connected to a platform's social affordances. Our findings extend past research on the perceptions and motivations of LGBTQ+ SNS users by identifying the significant social affordances (Fox & McEwan, 2017) they utilize in their online communities.

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