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## **“The more I look like Justin Bieber in the pictures, the better”: Queer women’s self-representation on Instagram**

### **Introduction**

I’ve had somebody recently ask me if I was a boy or a girl, so I had to clarify and let him know, yes, I’m a lesbian female and I dress as a male. But like, it’s just me. You know what I mean? Like, I live *me* so I don’t think it’s different but I guess I have to explain to people who don’t know. So when I hashtag ‘lesbian,’ it’s basically, I’m just letting them know what I like and my lifestyle. – @kelzz32

Kelzz explained her reasons for including #lesbian among the multiple hashtags she added to her Instagram photos. Her excitement about recently gaining followers and getting her videos noticed was tangible throughout our Skype call. Living in the western United States, she works most days at a warehouse but spends the rest of her time practicing hip-hop and urban dancing. She planned to go on tour with her dance partner soon, hoping that the attention she received for her dance videos on Instagram would attract audiences sizable enough to pay for their trip. Her identification as lesbian was evident from her hashtags and also implied in her fashion style and flirty messages directed at female audiences. Rather than maintaining this aspect of her identity separate from her career aspirations, it was fully integrated throughout her self-representation on Instagram.

In this chapter, I share the experiences of eight queer female<sup>1</sup> Instagrammers to demonstrate how sexual identity features in their networked self-representations on this platform. I view self-representations on Instagram – photos, videos, and the interactions surrounding them – as the building blocks for networked stories of the self that individuals shape and curate through platform affordances. Working with Alice Marwick’s (2015) observation that gaining attention on Instagram requires a combination of microcelebrity practices and stylized references to celebrity and popular culture, I identify how these women incorporate sexual identity into their integration of these self-representational approaches. Microcelebrity has long comprised a set of practices that users of participatory digital media adopt in order to forge connections with audiences (Senft, 2008). In her early work, Theresa Senft (2008) pioneered this concept, identifying that microcelebrity involves reflectivity, reflecting a desired image to oneself and others; reflexivity in the form of ongoing dialogue with audiences; and refraction in the way that various audiences perceive self-representations differently. Marwick (2016) points out that microcelebrity approaches shift across social media platforms, adapting to their technological affordances and social contexts. I integrate these notions to examine how queer women’s reflectivity, reflexivity, and management of refraction with regard to sexual identity can forge the strategically intimate connections required for microcelebrity while also referencing the styles and popular cultures that garner notoriety on Instagram. This notoriety, often measured by follower counts, is what Marwick (2015) terms “Instafame.” Recognizing these approaches to self-representation on Instagram highlights platform affordances, constraints, and challenges that queer women face in posting images and making connections that convey a desired networked self. It also demonstrates everyday users’ creativity and agency in producing self-representations in the service of their personal and economic aspirations.

### **Queer women’s mediated representation**

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<sup>1</sup> I adopt Mary Gray’s (2009) definition of “queer” as “the action of identity work” (p. 26), which involves “the collective labor of crafting, articulating, and pushing the boundaries of identities” (p. 26) – a process that was evident in participants’ self-representations. I refer to ‘women’ or ‘female’ individuals in alignment with how participants identified their gender, which includes trans and androgynous women. For lack of a neutral umbrella term for people of diverse sexual and gender identities (Barker, Richards, & Bowes-Catton, 2009), I refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer people in aggregate as LGBTQ people.

Instagram first caught my attention because it struck me as presenting different opportunities for queer women's representation from those perpetuated through broadcast media. Prior to the 1990s, LGBTQ people were largely absent from screen media, with once-off episodes introducing gay characters for dramatic effect but denying them focal plot lines or on screen relationships (Walters, 2001). This lack of visibility was intensified for queer women, whom Terry Castle (1993) describes as being subject to a "ghost effect." Their invisibility stems from women's sexuality being conceivable only in relation to men's sexuality due to gender discourses that deny women of sexual agency (Jagose, 2002). Therefore, it is no surprise that the increase in queer women's representation throughout the 1990s was termed "lesbian chic," as television, film, and magazines depicted queer women as normatively feminine to retain male audiences (Ciasullo, 2001). This trend has continued into the 2000s, with the rise of "heteroflexible" (Diamond, 2005) characters and celebrities who perform hyperfemininity and interact with each other sexually for men's attention, such as Madonna and Britney Spears kissing at the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards. While queer women's alternative media, such as zines and feminist music (Allen, 1997; Collins, 1999; Sport, 2007), have included a range of gender representations and targeted queer audiences, several decades of broadcast media have portrayed narrow representations of queer women in relation to men's sexual desires.

While today's representation of queer women in television, film, and streaming online media is more diverse, it still tends toward heteronormativity and other normative categories of identity to attract mainstream audiences. Smith and Tyler (2017) assert that contemporary media depictions of lesbians that appear to be ground-breaking actually reinforce post-feminist values. They analyze an episode in *Coronation Street*, a show with typically older audiences, which purports to push boundaries by including a lesbian wedding. However, the characters' feminine, white wedding dresses and traditional marriage ceremony reinforce the patriarchal gender roles and heteronormativity that post-feminism elides. This scene reflects a general tendency toward "gaystreaming" (Ng, 2013) in which shows cast white, upper middle class LGBTQ characters who appeal to multiple audiences through their exhibition of lavish, luxury lifestyles. Julia Himberg (2014) identifies this trend in television shows with lesbian characters and critiques it as ignoring "the realities of most sexual minorities, particularly sexual minorities of colour, of lower socioeconomic status,

and those in rural and conservative parts of the country” (p. 300). While there are exceptions, such as *The Wire*'s multiple African American and non-gender conforming lesbian characters (Dhaenens & Bauwel, 2012), gaystreaming remains prevalent across popular broadcast media. Even LGBTQ YouTubers support their careers as “social media entrepreneurs” (Cunningham, Craig, & Silver, 2016) by valorizing gender norms and idealized lifestyles. For example, popular YouTuber Ingrid Nilsen's make-up tutorials appeal to heterosexual audiences and corporate sponsors alike. Since many of the most visible representations of queer women today still frequently involve white, feminine, and upper middle class individuals, I became interested in how queer women's self-representations on Instagram deviated from, reproduced, or remixed these in various ways.

### **Microcelebrity and Instafame**

Microcelebrity involves ways of relating to audiences that developed with earlier forms of participatory technology and have shifted with the introduction of new platforms. Senft (2008) first described microcelebrity in her study of camgirls, women using webcams in the late 1990s to share about their lives. She explained that while conventional celebrity is generally tied to capital (fame supported by large amounts of money), which separates celebrities from ‘average’ people, microcelebrity involves forging a connection with the audience, regardless of capital and without guarantee of profit. As Senft observed camgirls' everyday lives, she noted three themes of microcelebrity in their activity, which included: reflectivity, as mediated self-representations served “as mirrors for those who choose to display themselves to the world;” reflexivity as “the way our dialectical exchanges place us in a continual feedback loop with others;” and refraction, occurring “when one person's definition of public is another's definition of private or professional” (p. 34). These themes of microcelebrity practice show how individuals share reflections of themselves that forge connections with audiences and, in turn, must be managed in how they are received.

As microcelebrity practices have become integrated into everyday users' approaches to self-representation on social media, scholars have built upon this concept. Later observing the proliferation of microcelebrity practices, Senft (2013) further defines microcelebrity as the contemporary imperative for individuals to form a coherent, branded self through social media. Alison Hearn (2008) notes that social

media enable individuals to build inventories of branded selves, which serve as commodities for public consumption. Through social media's affordances, individuals engage in the labor of producing "a public persona that might be of practical or relational use" (Hearn, 2008, p. 213) within unstable neoliberal economies. Brooke Duffy (2016) pinpoints this labor as central in many women's use of social media for creative entrepreneurship. She conceptualizes it as "aspirational labour" constituting "creative activities that hold the promise of social and economic capital" (p. 443). Aspirational laborers brand themselves through intimate displays of authenticity, forging affective relationships, and demonstrating brand devotion in ways that reinforce gendered histories of using women's bodies to sell commodities. Through these recent studies and critiques, it is clear that contemporary microcelebrity involves the labor of self-branding within economic and gendered systems of inequality.

Instagram provides a particular set of technological affordances and social context for microcelebrity and self-branding practices. In my previous work, a close reading of the app's interface and company materials revealed an emphasis on visual aesthetics, as Instagram's features and discursive materials encourage users to transform their photos into 'works of art' (Duguay, 2016). Noting this focus on visuals resonates with Marwick's (2015) observations about Instafame as a platform-specific variety of microcelebrity. With Instagram's emphasis on images and the dominance of selfie-taking, she argues that direct relationships with audiences take a backseat to visual self-presentation. Instafamous users attract audiences by reproducing "conventional status hierarchies of luxury, celebrity, and popularity that depend on the ability to emulate the visual iconography of mainstream celebrity culture" (Marwick, 2015, p. 139). In her analysis of highly followed accounts, she found that microcelebrity on Instagram rests on the ability to produce stylized visuals, displays of conspicuous consumption, and references to celebrity culture. Crystal Abidin's (2016) study of "Influencers" in Singapore also supports notions of an Instagram-specific variety of microcelebrity. Influencers gain attention and subsequent commercial profits through their use of high-end digital cameras to produce sleek selfies, showcasing luxury commodities and lifestyles. As these studies demonstrate cases of Instafame enacted by highly popular users, this raised questions for me regarding how queer women might negotiate Instafame in their everyday Instagram use.

## **Investigating representations on Instagram**

Aiming to understand queer women's representations on Instagram and the platform's influence on these representations, I engaged with multiple methods that built upon each other. Mentioned earlier, I conducted a close reading of Instagram using the walkthrough method (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2016) to examine the app's affordances and the way the company framed its purpose for users. With this foundational knowledge about the app, I used textual analysis (McKee, 2003) to examine more than 400 photos with hashtags related to queer women (e.g., #lezzigram, #lesbehonest, #girlswholikegirls). The majority of content was split between pornographic/sollicitous images selling sexual services (e.g., pornography subscriptions) and individuals' representations of themselves and their everyday lives, often in the form of selfies. Focusing on individual users' self-representations, I sifted through hundreds of images of everyday women who were smiling at the camera, flexing in front of the mirror, on holidays with their partners, or posting in other poses and locations. I knew I needed to speak with them to understand what they considered when creating their self-representations: what were they trying to depict and for what outcomes? What did it mean to them to include queer hashtags or other indicators of their sexual identity?

I gathered interview participants by sending direct messages through Instagram to women whose self-representations appeared in my content sample. Six responded and two more approached me after I posted about my study on Facebook and Twitter. I held Skype or telephone interviews with 8 women in total, who ranged in age from 24 – 46, lived in Australia, Canada, Thailand, and the USA, came from a range of ethnic backgrounds, and worked in many different sectors. All participants identified as women, with one additionally identifying as genderqueer, one as gender non-conforming, and another as transfemale. Seven participants identified as lesbian and one identified as gay. Some participants asked me to include their Instagram username to give credit to their photos and publicize their accounts; I have included these upon first mentioning a participant and have otherwise used pseudonyms for those who did not wish to be identifiable. Several participants also granted permission to use their photos in examples.

This chapter focuses on my interview data because it most clearly captures a variety of queer women's approaches to self-representation on Instagram. Throughout

my analysis, it became clear that participants' self-representations involved at least some forms of microcelebrity practice as aspirational labor toward economic and/or personal aims. Kelzz dreamed of making it big with her dancing and leaving her warehouse job. Alex (@alexthehuman) created a second account (@dapperdykes) to promote her clothing line for gender non-conforming people. Emi showcased her tattoo business while her girlfriend Queenie (@Queenie\_von\_curves) promoted her modeling and burlesque shows. Kamala hoped to draw bookings for her motivational speaking seminars and Julie spread the word about her children's yoga and recreational programs. Those without economic motivations still sought to build a particular reputation: Thea portrayed herself as a well-read college student and Mita (@mitagibson) advocated for trans rights as a vocal trans activist. Indicators of sexual identity were prominent throughout their aspirational labor and were communicated through enduring microcelebrity practices and Instafamous tactics. Senft's (2008) themes of microcelebrity as involving reflectivity, reflexivity, and the negotiation of refraction were evident as individuals shared intimately about their sexual identity to forge relationships with audiences. These women's labor of producing stylized images, displaying commodities related to sexual identity, and referencing popular, recognizable forms of 'lesbian' or queer identity were also interwoven throughout microcelebrity themes. The following sections investigate this integration of microcelebrity and Instafamous strategies more closely as queer women enacted them in their networked self-representations.

### **Reflective identity building**

Participants included intimate portrayals of sexual identity to forge relationships with audiences while engaging in popular platform practices and referencing queer culture to construct a reflection of their perceived 'self' personally and for broader audiences. They largely achieved this by using hashtags, displaying relationships, and posting strategically tailored selfies. In the opening quote, Kelzz described hashtags like #lesbian as an indicator of "what I like and my lifestyle." This highlights how such hashtags enable her to personally claim a particular sexual identity while also referencing a collectively constructed lesbian 'lifestyle' outside of the norm. Alex also seamlessly strung together these aspects of personal and broader reference, "If I feel like I look really gay, I probably will use #gay just, again, it's a big part of my identity." She discusses #gay as essential to her identity while also

noting that she often ‘looks gay,’ as a reference to overarching notions of gay fashion and styles. Therefore, sexual identity hashtags serve as a personal declaration while also connecting individuals with the volumes of other Instagram users who also incorporate these hashtags in their self-representational practices. Several participants used broad and specific sexual identity terms for these dual purposes. Mita used #translesbian to reflect her identity and also because “#lesbian is such a big cloud...that’s when you have to get into the multiple hashtags...to kind of filter people, like, to funnel people that are similar to you.” Resembling how Instafamous users reference luxury lifestyles (Marwick, 2015), sexual identity hashtags reference LGBTQ lifestyles made imaginable through media representation, stereotypes, and commercialization. Instead of sticking with particular identity labels, participants often used multiple sexual identity hashtags, such as #lesbiansofinstagram with #dykesofinstagram, to reflect their membership in such lifestyles in order to gain LGBTQ followers and queer-friendly audiences.

For participants in relationships, references to their partners reflected personal aspects of identity while also often tying into broader cultural references. Julie aimed to be out on Instagram but was still concerned about homophobic parents boycotting her children’s programs. She occasionally posted subtle couple selfies to portray her sexual identity:

I think it's very hard for me to actually communicate my identity as a lesbian in a selfie without being with my partner because of – in terms of the way people sort of stereotype LGBT people, I don't think I necessarily fulfill any of the stereotypes.

Since her appearance did not signal her sexual identity according to collective notions of queerness and she did not want to turn off audiences through overt sexual identity hashtags, Julie worked small displays of affection toward her partner into her photos. However, since queer women in relationships are often disregarded as platonic ‘gal pals’ (McBean, 2016), other participants displayed their relationships alongside more salient references to sexual identity and LGBTQ popular culture. Emi described the unique ‘couple hashtag’ she created with Queenie, #rainbowdashandsoarin4ever: “My girlfriend has rainbow hair and so she gets called Rainbow Dash a lot and then my, uh, drag persona that I have is, looks a lot like the other pony, Soarin. So we've decided those are our names.” The hashtag references My Little Pony, a show that has been appropriated by LGBTQ online fandom communities that reimagine the

characters as queer.<sup>2</sup> The couple combines this personal hashtag with popular platform practices. Queenie remarked to Emi, “I #moonday-ed your butt” and showed me a couple selfie she posted as part of the platform trend of sharing a butt-related photo on Mondays. The photo displays their tattoos representing their My Little Pony personas. Couples’ self-representations are personal portrayals of sexual identity and intimate relationships. They can also appeal to broader audiences by reproducing platform trends, mimicking celebrity practices of posting couple selfies (e.g. Bayley, 2017), and referencing popular culture.

Participants who were not posing with partners in selfies relied on styles associated with lesbian stereotypes or queer fashion in their self-representations. Thea described one of her selfies as “actually a very staged photo” and noted that wearing a backwards hat was a key component of the photo because it was:

A lesbian thing. Actually, like I wear a lot of backwards hats to sort of make a statement to people who – because I don’t – because I think I look straight, so it sort of lets people know...so yeah, other lesbians are going to know, generally.

With her otherwise feminine appearance, Thea adopted the backwards hat as a more masculine fashion item to signal her lesbian identity. The hat owes its potency as an indicator of sexual identity to its association with lesbian identity in popular media, such as celebrity YouTuber Hannah Hart’s iconic snapback hat,<sup>3</sup> and its association with lesbian culture alongside other stereotypical fashion items, such as the plaid shirt or karabiner key ring (Cauterucci, 2016).

Participants’ emphasis on fashion in selfies was associated with their desire to mimic celebrity styles that reflected their sexual identity and affiliated them with glamorous lifestyles. As I discussed with Alex about her numerous stylized selfies, portraying creative angles of her flat-brimmed hat, short haircut, and tattoos, she joked, “The more I look like Justin Bieber in the pictures, the better.” Lesbian culture has appropriated Bieber’s feminine masculinity as an indicator of queerness expressed through drag performances, fashion items, and the iconic Bieber-style haircut<sup>4</sup> (Brickman, 2016). Since Bieber’s fashion attempts to assert his masculinity, which is

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, the “Rainbow Dash” fan wiki: [http://mlpfanart.wikia.com/wiki/Rainbow\\_Dash](http://mlpfanart.wikia.com/wiki/Rainbow_Dash)

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.autostraddle.com/style-thief-achieve-hannah-harts-hartosexual-style-for-yourself-312851/>

<sup>4</sup> See <https://lesbianswholooklikejustinbieber.tumblr.com/>

routinely called into question by his boyish mannerisms and emotional songs, replicating his gender representation gives an ironic nod to this fluidity. It also portrays a soft masculine presentation, characteristic of the ‘boi’ gender identity label (in contrast to hard masculine ‘butch’ gender presentation), popular among some lesbian celebrities, such as Ruby Rose (Hoff, 2015). By incorporating celebrity styles into her self-representations, Alex not only depicts her gender and sexual identity but also situates herself in relation to attention grabbing, celebrity lifestyles.

By producing personal, stylized, and culturally recognizable self-representations, participants felt a sense of self-validation and that they were presenting audiences with a particular image of LGBTQ people. Alex’s use of Instagram allowed her to “see what a lot of other people are doing” and she noted that, “It’s kind of helped me find myself in a lot of ways.” Similarly, Kelzz experienced a shift after she started sharing her photos publicly, “It kind of broke the shell I was hiding in – in a way, and it opened me up to be even more okay about who I am.” For Mita, who added #LGBTfamily to several photos of herself with her wife and baby son, she viewed her self-representations as challenging normative discourses. She aimed:

To portray just gender broadness and just LGBT awareness, you know, there's not just a man and a woman who can have a family. There can be two women that can have a family; there can be two women that can have kids – genetic kids – you know what I mean?

These women’s microcelebrity practices share similarities with those of trans YouTube vloggers, whose videos chronicling their transitions reflect their gender identity back to them while also making visible trans identities that challenge normative gender discourses (Raun, 2014). However, whereas trans YouTubers tended to focus on their personal stories, these queer women’s self-representations drew on Instagram-specific elements in their microcelebrity techniques. Through platform features, stylized staging of selfies and couple photos, and references to popular culture, women shared intimately about their sexual identity while also asserting their association with shared and glamourized lifestyles in ways that have the potential to attract audiences.

### **Reflexive self-promotion**

Aligning with Senft's (2008) observation that microcelebrity involves reflexive dialectical exchanges, participants' use of hashtags and other platform features also connected them with others for the purpose of accumulating audiences as fan bases, which provide attention and feedback. To further attract audiences, individuals engaged in a process of observing popular or celebrity Instagrammers, replicating their techniques, and adjusting their posts based on user response (e.g., gains in followers, increases in likes). Several women carefully chose aesthetically pleasing backgrounds and angles for images, such as Kelzz's repurposing of a parking lot in her neighborhood into a sleek dance video backdrop. Kamala often shot thematic photo series: "Maybe ten, twenty, thirty in the one location...just to know, what did you see from the same location?" She felt that showcasing interesting locations around Thailand could spark dialogue with her followers. Mita eschewed Instagram's filters for manually adjusting photo saturation and hue while Emi and Julie used third party apps to add borders and create collages. Several participants also created personal hashtags, such as #tattoosbyemi and #kingkelzz32, serving to further transform the self into a recognizable and memorable brand. These reflexive upskilling and self-promotional practices, involving individuals' iterative tailoring of techniques to suit their aspirations, provided the means for attaining the stylized aesthetics that Marwick (2015) notes as essential to Instafame.

With polished self-representations, participants built their audiences through networking techniques, drawing attention to their personal brands. Several participants regularly used the @mention feature, which tags another user in a photo or caption, to "shout out" other accounts in attempts to invoke their attention and attract their followers by showing affiliation with them. When Queenie posted meals made with ingredients from a nearby "vegan butcher shop," she shouted out their account, gaining attention from other vegans on Instagram as well as the shop, which eventually offered her a job. In turn, many participants aimed to have celebrities or Instafamous accounts shout out or regram<sup>5</sup> their photos to grab the attention of the celebrities' followers. This practice resembles collaborative videos where popular YouTubers feature each other or up-and-coming users to share audiences (Morris & Anderson, 2015). Kelzz's recent increase in followers was attributable to a celebrity

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<sup>5</sup> The practice of re-posting another user's photos into one's photo feed, similar to retweeting on Twitter or sharing a post on Facebook.

regramming one of her dance videos. Similarly, Alex's @dapperdykes account owed many of its fans to a popular trans user who shouted it out to his followers early in its creation. Alex experienced an even greater influx as this practice collided with celebrity culture when a Ruby Rose fan account shouted out @dapperdykes in a photo, "There was a picture of Ruby Rose holding a pair of my boxers that came out, and I sold a few hundred pairs that week." Through these networking practices and Instagram's affordances for building large, interconnected audiences, even everyday users are able to accrue sizeable fan bases.

As these women anticipated and responded to audiences by adjusting their techniques, demonstrating affiliations, and sharing self-representations, their audiences also provided feedback. Since Queenie participated in body-positive campaigns, such as #rockthecrop, a trending hashtag encouraging women of any size to wear any clothes they want (including crop top shirts), she received many positive messages from her followers. They also frequently recognized and complimented her in person:

We went to a roller derby event Saturday night and one of the roller girls came up to me and said, "Oh my God, Queenie Von Curves, I stalk you on Instagram." ...I feel like, especially locally, I have a really great exposure to people through Instagram...

This instance demonstrates the permeation of Queenie's digital microcelebrity into physical spaces, as her fan base provides feedback on the app and in person, indicating that her content resonates with her followers.

Other participants engaged in sustained back-and-forth dialogue with followers who reached out to them. Mita received daily messages from trans people or their partners, asking about her transition and requesting advice. She responded to each message because, "I was once one of those people that was struggling with how to do this, you know, so I get back to everybody that is looking for help." She also compiled an album of Instagram photos, featuring her family and showcasing her life post-transition, posting it to Reddit to support and inspire trans users on that platform. This cross-platform sharing extended her dialogue to new audiences while also drawing them to her self-representations on Instagram. Marwick (2015) notes that with Instagram's minimal space for and emphasis on text comments, Instafame diverges from models of microcelebrity that rely on reaching out to audiences directly and textually through comments and written acknowledgements. However,

participants' behind-the-scenes private messages with followers and photo-inspired dialogue on other platforms demonstrate the endurance of these forms of direct interaction, which are less outwardly visible and harder to trace than on-platform, public-facing conversations. These other approaches to microcelebrity combine with Instafamous practices relying on visuals and affiliations, such as through the use of @mentions and cultural references in images. Altogether, these examples demonstrate multiple levels of dialectical reflexivity in participants' self-representational practices.

### **Managing refracted selves**

Senft (2008) mentions “refraction” as the way some audiences perceive the personal aspects of self-representations as suitable for public viewing and others perceive them as content that *should be* private. For me, this theme also conjures the scientific concept of refraction: as light hits a target, it can be refracted, or deflected, to other surfaces in the process. While social media users produce their images for an imagined audience (Marwick & boyd, 2011), these representations can be inadvertently refracted to, or received by, other unanticipated audiences. On Instagram, queer women negotiated the refraction of self-representations that communicated their sexual identity to unintended audiences, which included: known acquaintances, who were likely to be offended or react negatively; unknown and pseudonymous audiences, who responded in crass, harmful, and violent ways; and Instagram's moderators, who imposed platform values derived from dominant discourses. Participants managed these refractions by separating audiences, ignoring harassers, and self-censoring their images.

Since all participants had public accounts, they were aware that anyone could view their self-representations and intended for them to be viewed widely. Emi put this bluntly, “Well, what's the point of doing it if – how do you get all this attention for things if only the people I select see it? Kind of defeats the purpose.” Most of the women knew family, friends, or colleagues who would view their images negatively and while some spoke of these acquaintances as homophobic, others discussed them as being more ‘traditional’ or ‘sensitive’ and viewing sexual identity as a private matter. However, few participants were concerned about these audiences seeing their Instagram images because they mainly congregated on Facebook. Mita explained:

There are pictures on Instagram that are a little bit more risqué...like, there's more boob-age or whatever, and having my grandparents or uncles and aunts

on [Facebook] – it’s like, if they want to see it, they can go on my Instagram, you know what I mean?

Rather than posting her photos on Facebook, where they could pop up in her extended family’s News Feeds, she maintained them on Instagram knowing they would require extra effort on her family’s part to access. Participants were careful to maintain this divide, such as by Thea disabling Instagram’s feature for automatically cross-posting to Facebook so her friends would not be drawn to her account if they saw an Instagram-style photo in their News Feeds. These practices reflect microcelebrity techniques for differentially targeting audiences, which have become widespread in everyday users’ social media practices (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Senft, 2013).

Several women received harassing and sexual messages and comments from users who were previously unknown to them. Mita recalled only two messages from users discriminating against trans people but she was accustomed to a regular barrage of sexual messages and “dick pics.” While she attempted to counter this by capitalizing the words “LESBIAN” and “MARRIED” in her profile biography, the messages persisted. Since Queenie often posts photos promoting her burlesque dancing, she perceived dealing with sexual messages and comments as “just part of what I have to deal with in the industry I’m in.” However, she noticed an increase in angry and violent comments after she started posting photos with Emi:

I think for some of the straight, male followers that I had, who would comment or like the photos that I had that were scantily clad or things like that, I think knowing I was a lesbian was a turn-off for them because they couldn't imagine things, to be honest.

While these messages reflect the volumes of harassment and gender-based violence that women encounter regularly on digital media platforms (Citron, 2009; Jane, 2014), sexually entitled messages targeting queer women gain fuel from broadcast media representations that perpetuate heterosexualized lesbian fantasies for male audiences (Diamond, 2005; Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009). When Queenie disrupted this fantasy by including couple selfies with Emi, whose masculine appearance does not fit heteronormative perceptions of attractiveness, her followers became upset. Harassers’ use of pseudonyms and throwaway accounts, along with Instagram’s limited features for monitoring user activity, leaves women with little recourse. Similar to Marwick’s (2015) finding that Instafamous accounts largely ignored

critical or hate-filled comments, many participants blocked commenters, ignored messages, and ceased to engage with these users any further.

Some participants also managed refractions of sexual identity that came to the platform's attention. To promote her underwear line, Alex posted a photo to @dapperdykes that featured a feminine-presenting woman embracing a more masculine-presenting woman. Both women were in their underwear and their breasts were obscured or covered. Although the photo did not violate Instagram's Terms of Service by portraying full nudity, the image was flagged as inappropriate. Alex pointed out that other underwear companies on Instagram often posted photos with more sexual content and nudity, "You see girls all the time in less, but I think there are a lot of homophobic people that like to just bash on my @dapperdykes page." She heeded Instagram's warning and removed the photo rather than risking the platform closing her account and losing hundreds of followers.

Queenie similarly felt as though Instagram's moderation processes targeted women. She saw them as constraining both her self-representations and promotion of her burlesque dancing: "You can only get so nude on Instagram." Her frustration reflects the sentiments of feminist artists who, as Olszanowski (2014) observes, highlight with their images how Instagram censors women's bodies regardless of context and according to gender discourses that deny women the agency to display their bodies on their own terms. Crawford and Gillespie (2014) assert that while platforms employ flagging systems to appear neutral in processes of content moderation, such systems function according to multiple embedded influences, including corporate strategies and values. Participants managed these refractions through self-censorship and relocating their self-representations to platforms with different policies. Queenie posted her nude modeling portraits and burlesque photos to her 'not safe for work' Tumblr account to avoid Instagram's moderation. While this accords with Instafamous approaches that maintain their self-representations in accordance with platform policies and conventions, it also provides a view of how users manage microcelebrity across platforms.

## **Conclusion**

These stories and experiences from queer women about their Instagram use show how sexual identity can play a key role in the production of networked self-representations that adopt platform-specific microcelebrity practices. Aligning with

longstanding themes of microcelebrity practice, participants reflected their sexual identity in intimate displays to connect with audiences, tailored their self-representations reflexively according to audience feedback, and managed refraction by targeting specific audiences. They combined these practices with Instafamous techniques, following platform trends of using popular hashtags, shouting out accounts with many followers, producing highly stylized images, and referencing shared LGBTQ and popular culture. These findings build upon Marwick's (2015) recognition of popular users' Instafamous practices by identifying similar approaches in the self-representations of everyday users. Further, they highlight how an identity category, particularly sexual identity, can serve as a form of personal expression and a reference that affiliates individuals with recognizable and glamourized lifestyles.

While Instafamous practices stem from Instagram's platform architecture and user conventions, queer women's experiences show how the platform both afforded and constrained aspirational labor toward personal and/or economic goals. Instagram's hashtags and @mentions enabled individuals to declare their affiliation with particular identities and users while also connecting with others over these shared affiliations. Filters and features for adjusting images, along with compatible third party apps, allowed queer women to produce stylized images while the platform's emphasis on visual imagery made intertextual references to celebrities and popular culture salient for audiences. However, participants also resisted platform features that converged audiences, such as automatic cross-posting to Facebook, in order to produce targeted self-representations. Other users' practices, employing pseudonymous accounts to harass and send unsolicited sexual messages, also added to queer women's daily labor of blocking and reporting accounts. Ignoring these comments and working around Instagram's limited space for textual address, participants shifted dialogue with audiences into private messages or to other platforms. Instagram's content moderation policies and user flagging system required some participants to self-censor their self-representations or risk losing the audiences they cultivated through Instafamous practices. Although the women in this study used platform-specific means of gaining attention for their business, talent, or reputation, they also developed work-arounds and engaged with multiple platforms when Instagram limited their microcelebrity practices.

When speaking with these women, it was difficult to gauge the actual outcomes of their Instafamous approaches to microcelebrity. Participants who

employed a range of microcelebrity practices across platforms tended to have more followers than others but it was not clear if this could be directly linked to financial or personal outcomes. Duffy (2016) notes that the reward system for aspirational labor is highly uneven since laborers' creative production is often mired in gender expectations and overshadowed by the consumption of branded goods as part of their self-promotion. Participants in my study struggled against gender discourses applied to queer women. This was evident in the lengths they went to not be rendered invisible, attempting to 'look gay' or countering a 'straight look' with queer hashtags, fighting assumptions that queer women are actually attracted to men or are always heteroflexible. Their labor also involved continuous deflection of heterosexualizing messages and dick pics following from popularized lesbian fantasies in broadcast media. In order to be recognizable as queer, participants referenced popular culture, commodities (e.g., fashion items), and celebrities branded or associated with LGBTQ lifestyles. Such references tended to highlight the white, upper class, commercialized, and normatively gendered representations of LGBTQ people and associated celebrities that already dominate broadcast media. These dominant gendered and heteronormative representations complicate queer women's microcelebrity practices and reinforce the existing concentration of attention on popular and celebrity culture.

At the same time, queer women's self-representation on Instagram does make a difference. In the broad media landscape, queer women's microcelebrity strategies bring visibility to a range of identities that are generally absent from broadcast media. From the dance videos of an African American woman to the wilderness photos of a translesbian woman and her family, the women in my study represented diverse ethnic, gender, and class identities in many different ways. Individually, their Instagram use factored into broader strategies for reflecting a sense of identity, connecting with others, and realizing their aspirations. Together, with thousands of other LGBTQ Instagram users, their individual stories told through visual content and networked through platform technology provide a collective depiction of queer community and solidarity. As demonstrated by participants' decisions regarding microcelebrity practices, they exercised agency in harnessing Instagram's affordances for their personal, economic, and social purposes. This involved developing creative self-branding practices, managing self-representations, and engaging with multiple platforms to include sexual identity as an element of their networked selves.

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