

CHAPTER 1

Digital Mediations of Sexual Identity and Personal Disclosure

Phyllis gave a loud sigh and plunked her iced tea on the table between us. We were early into the interview, and I had only asked standard demographic questions so far. The latest was, “How would you describe your sexual identity?” I watched the condensation roll down the sides of her beverage—evidence of another sweltering day in Queensland, Australia—and waited as she responded reluctantly, “I’m probably a lesbian—that seems best.” She settled on this descriptor to satisfy my question but quickly discounted it, “I’m pretty boring; that’s all I am.”

I nodded noncommittally, not wanting to invalidate her sentiment. As a queer-identified woman dedicated to researching LGBTQ people’s use of social media, clearly I did not find lesbians boring, but I kept this to myself. I worried that the rest of the interview might also be interspersed with sighs, but Phyllis became more animated as soon as I asked her to open the dating app Tinder on her phone. Proud of the witty one-liner self-description she had fit into her profile, she read it aloud, “I excel at dank memes, lesbianing and getting my law assessments done six weeks in advance.” She turned the screen toward me and exclaimed, “That’s me.” The description was followed by three emoji: a peace sign, a rainbow, and two women holding hands (☺️🌈👭).

There was a lot packed into this short declaration. Phyllis had managed to demonstrate her humor, with the reference to “dank memes” as a self-effacing passion for overdone jokes, and to humblebrag about the diligence with which she was completing a challenging university degree. Couched within this description was a reference to the sexual identity she

had lamented earlier as inconsequential. When I asked why she had decided to include these details, her response focused on this identifier, “The ‘lesbianing’ thing—it’s from *Orange Is the New Black* and, just in case they didn’t get that I was gay from the rainbows, they’re like, ‘No, she’s definitely gay. She’s a lesbian. She said she’s good at lesbianing.’”

Netflix’s comedy-drama prison show *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–19) was hitting peak popularity when I conducted these interviews in 2016. The lead character, Piper, had relationships with both men and women, and although the show shied away from giving her a bisexual label (Ferguson, 2016), other characters openly identified as lesbian. In episode 9 of the first season, a redneck-stereotyped character, nicknamed Pennsatucky, tells a corrections officer that Piper and her ex-girlfriend are engaging in “lesbian activity,” in fact, “they lesbianing together.” Fans quickly spread this short, catchy phrase online (see figure 1.1), though it faded in popularity as the show continued. Phyllis’s self-description of her sexual identity was itself a dank meme.

Personal but Not Private is about these instances on social media, in which putting one’s sexual identity out there for others to see becomes



Figure 1.1 *Orange Is the New Black* character Tiffany “Pennsatucky” Doggett telling Officer Healy about Piper’s sexual dancing with ex-girlfriend Alex Vause. Source: u/orionlady, Lesbianing. Posted on August 20, 2013. <https://www.reddit.com/r/actuallesbians/comments/1ks5yh/lesbianing/>.

important. In the context of our interview, it did not matter to Phyllis whether I wrote down that she identified as lesbian or anything else—I was just an interviewer. She had mostly signed up for the interview because her friend told her it would be fun to chat about Tinder. But I would later learn that Phyllis declaring herself a lesbian on Tinder was a significant choice within the app's framing and in light of its users. This declaration served to attract the types of matches she considered date-worthy, while Tinder's settings and swipe features were not sufficient for achieving this alone.

The analyses presented throughout this book demonstrate that queer women's representations of sexual identity become important because they serve particular purposes on different social media platforms, whether these purposes comprise partner seeking, the accrual of capital, or rallying others around a collective statement. Sexual identity may not be something that all people feel the need to mention in casual, everyday interactions. For some people like Phyllis, who even in her early twenties had been out to her acquaintances for years and who moves with ease across many social situations due to elements of privilege like white skin and upper-middle-class status, sexual identity is inconsequential in many contexts. For others, conditions of homophobia or intersectional discrimination may limit their ability to express their sexual identity at all. However, one only needs to run a few searches on popular platforms to see a volume of content by individuals showcasing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ),¹ and other diverse gender and sexual identities. I argue that many of these self-representations are intentional, instrumental, curated, and ultimately modulated in conjunction with platform mechanisms in attempts to invoke particular outcomes.

Self-representation has the potential to be extremely powerful. I use the term *self-representation* to describe how ordinary—that is, everyday—people create mediated texts with the potential for subsequent engagement (Thumim, 2012). While *self-presentation* can be thought of more generally as something that we may do passively or in response to others, *self-representation* holds greater agency, often involving premeditated and intentional ways of representing oneself, and digital technologies can facilitate this. Individuals create mediated texts in the form of statements, photos, videos, and other kinds of posts, which others can view, circulate, and respond to as they take advantage of digital tools enabling collective creativity (Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2006). The queer women's self-representations you will encounter throughout this book include Tinder profiles similar to Phyllis's in their adornment with LGBTQ-related emoji, glamorous Instagram photos tagged with #girlswholikegirls, and long-lost Vine skits calling out homophobia. Through a combination

of long-standing references to sexual identity, such as the rainbow flag, and forms of digital culture like hashtags, individuals choose how to include this personal and often intimate detail about themselves in their social media.

Of course, social media platforms' complex political, economic, socio-cultural, and technological arrangements have a profound effect on their users' self-representations. These factors shape how content is produced and presented to others while also scaffolding the environments where interactions take place among users (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2018; van Dijck, 2013). Platformed self-representations are not only the product of an individual's self-expression but also intrinsically tied to the digital formats, markets, and policies through which they are deployed. Self-representations of sexual identity combine with platform arrangements in particular ways, rubbing up against censorship policies or surfacing in the newsfeeds of forgotten acquaintances.

As the title suggests, this book is about how all of this comes together when something personal—specifically, sexual identity—is shared on social media in a way that is not private. For reasons I will explain, this book focuses on queer women: people whose gender is female and who are attracted to others who are also female. This definition understands gender as mutually constructed among individuals and society while acknowledging its range and fluidity, meaning that included in these pages are transgender, cisgender, gender nonconforming, feminine, and masculine women. I describe these women as queer due to their tension with heteronormativity and other normative systems of oppression that intersect with sexual identity (Warner, 1999). However, my findings are pertinent for everyone because social media encourage sharing—this is the default platform activity and a Silicon Valley mantra.

Scholars Zizi Papacharissi and Paige Gibson (2011) point out that we trade our privacy and personal information on social media in exchange for sociability. Both my previous research and several other studies have focused on how LGBTQ people who may not want to share widely information about their sexual identity develop strategies for keeping certain posts from the prying eyes of homophobic colleagues or family members (Duguay, 2016a; Hanckel et al., 2019). However, as I have looked closely at queer women's self-representations—examining their content, talking with them about their decision-making, and deeply investigating the platforms they use—it has become apparent that there is no easy compilation of digital literacy resources for managing personal sharing on social media. There is no heuristic, standard set of strategies or hack for your privacy settings. Instead, for people who manage a personal piece of information that can

be both powerful and potentially stigmatizing if shared, there are multiple and ongoing approaches taken by the user, along with several platform affordances that come into play.

There are also many instances when platforms get in the way of these approaches, leading to self-representations being circulated more widely than intended or, conversely, rendered invisible. Notably, this book does not focus on maintaining sexual identity as private but on the important daily efforts that go into sharing personal information through social media to invoke meaningful outcomes. The book's framework of *identity modulation* provides a way to understand individual and platform roles in the management of personal information on social media.

IDENTITY MODULATION

“Modulate your voice!” my mother used to tell my brother and me when we were being rambunctious. This guidance was not merely a request for us to be quieter; otherwise she might have said, “Pipe down!” Instead, it was an invitation for us to consider the appropriate level of expression given our activity, the environment, and the people surrounding us. Whether in the backyard, at school, or at the dinner table, modulating my voice meant something different, and I adjusted accordingly. My resulting verbal expression was then a product of both my own agency and the shaping role of the social and material context.

Digital media scholar John Cheney-Lippold (2017) introduces the concept of modulation into the context of digital media technologies. He notes that the term holds a central idea of “dynamism and variance according to stability” (p. 101). Modulation reflects the capacity to adjust and change in relation to other factors that remain the same, such as my shift from an “outside voice” to a softer, more articulate utterance around the family dinner table.² Cheney-Lippold fleshes out this concept through philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s (1992) description of modulation as the way that contemporary *societies of control* function. According to Deleuze, control mechanisms constantly modulate influential factors in people’s lives, from exchange rates to salaries. Focusing on computational algorithms as a control mechanism, Cheney-Lippold asserts that as our identities have become datafied through the use of digital technologies, control is exerted upon us when the algorithms interpreting and defining our identities change—or modulate—in frequent and unknown ways. In his analysis, algorithms modulate identity categories built from large-scale data aggregation. This modulation then affects how we are targeted as consumers, are treated as

citizens, and see ourselves while algorithms serve up responsive content through our platforms and devices.

Data and algorithms are certainly relevant to the experiences and arrangements of digital technologies discussed in this book. But I want to pick up on Cheney-Lippold's emphasis on modulation as dynamic, variant, and ever-changing, drawing on it to consider how both users and platforms can be forces of modulation. My research leads me to consider more widely how individuals, situated within particular histories and cultures of sexuality and digital media, interface not only with algorithms but also with multiple aspects of platforms' technological features, economic interests, and governance measures. Therefore, I build on science and technology scholarship that takes seriously the mutual shaping of users and technology to examine such modulation processes (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999; Sismondo, 2010).

To do so, I find it useful to return to the idea of sound modulation, which—after all—is what underlies the prompt to “modulate your voice!” The processing of sound waves provides an appropriate metaphor to guide us through what happens when individuals signal personal information on platforms. Modulation processes on a radio channel occur when an *input wave* is imposed on a *carrier wave* to encode it with information, such as speech or music (Tait Communications, 2019). The resulting combined sound wave is changed by the modulation process: it may have a different frequency—affecting the pitch—or an altered amplitude, making the sound louder or quieter. I sometimes liken identity modulation to adjusting the volume switch on one's self-representation. The individual presses the buttons, whereas the platform defines the boundaries of loudness or quietness. While I return to this connection with volume in chapter 3, the following section makes clear that identity modulation has multiple dynamics, so it is necessary to think about it beyond binary qualities such as loud or quiet.

Sound modulation is an entanglement between the sound and multiple actors involved in its processing. Cultural studies scholar Jonathan Sterne and music historian Tara Rodgers (2011) define signal processing as what “happens in the middle of media” (p. 35). The signal processing of sound waves takes place among musicians, playback technology, and listeners to the extent that when it “modulates recorded sound or music . . . the effects tend to be heard as inseparable from the sound and music itself” (p. 35). These scholars maintain that this inseparability makes signal processing, as the modulation of sound, difficult to critique and analyze.

Self-representation of sexual identity on social media has a similarly seamless quality. Sexual identity can be understood as a specific signal or

input wave, which is communicated by, with, and through a platform—as a metaphorical carrier wave—in ways that modulate this information. While the individual has agency in crafting a self-representation and anticipating how the platform may shape it, platforms complicate individuals' approaches. This mutual shaping between the user and the platform is not usually discernible by the time a self-representation reaches one's social media audiences, who interpret the information within not just the platform's context but also the broader sociocultural meanings relating to sexuality.

Identity modulation pertains to the ongoing processes that shape the self-representation of an individual's personal information—sexual identity, in this case—in relation to social media audiences. It involves individual decision-making, in which judgment calls are made when pairing a potentially sensitive or stigmatized piece of personal information with other identifying information, such as one's legal name or visual likeness. However, identity modulation is also contingent on social media's features, functions, policies, and norms that make certain modes of action available (or more likely) over others. To understand how identity modulation is pivotal in arrangements among people and technology, it is necessary to consider, first, the sociocultural meaning of sexual identity as a specific kind of personal information and, second, the implications of disclosing this information through platforms and apps.

Sexual Identity as Personal, Not (Necessarily) Private

I understood sociologist Erving Goffman's (1963) definition of stigma long before ever reading his words. Growing up in the 1990s, I watched reruns of the iconic Canadian teenage drama *Degrassi Junior High* (1987–91) after school every day. The show covered an array of issues—from drugs to teen pregnancy—with a cast that was much more diverse than other television shows of the time. One episode, aptly named “Rumor Has It,” remains etched in my memory. The main plotline goes like this: a teacher, Ms. Avery, is rumored to be a lesbian, and this worries Caitlin, a female student who keeps having dreams that vaguely indicate some attraction between her and Ms. Avery. Caitlin's friends eventually pick up on her worry and accuse her of also being a lesbian. This accusation leads her to snap at Ms. Avery, who then has a heart-to-heart with Caitlin in which Ms. Avery establishes she is not a lesbian after all. The episode's key challenge to the rumor is a question, echoed by one student throughout and by Ms. Avery at the end: “What difference would it make?” Through my preteen eyes, the

answer was: a life-altering difference. Despite the show's attempt to address homophobia, the episode depicts suspected lesbian characters being teased, treated with disgust, and othered. It reinforces Goffman's (1963) definition of stigma as that which forges difference between people based on a discrepancy between assumptions about individuals and their actual qualities. The students assume everyone is, or should be, heterosexual, and so the prospect of Caitlin or Ms. Avery being different subjects them to stigma, enacted through words and actions that shame them.

Throughout the episode, the students find evidence for Ms. Avery's lesbianism, such as glimpses of her holding hands with friends and the fact that she lives with another woman. These scenes illustrate how "deviant" practices are understood to communicate something about identity. Philosopher Michel Foucault (1978/1990) traced a similar trajectory through religious, psychiatric, and medical institutions, uncovering how they incited people to connect sexual practices to labels or diagnoses. Through these institutions and the imperative they created for self-identifying with such labels, sexual identity became sticky, something that sticks to a person—it became personal. One of the episode's terrifying dream sequences illustrates this process of practices becoming associated with identity labels when Ms. Avery gives Caitlin a side hug and the other students chant: "Lesbian! Lesbian! Lesbian!"

Judgments of discrepancy and deviance rest on assumptions stemming from dominant cultural practices, perceptions, and values. Political scientist Cathy Cohen (2005) defines heteronormativity as the default assumption of heterosexuality, which also comes with gender roles and scripts. Connecting the dots between sex and gender, philosopher Judith Butler's (1990) "heterosexual matrix" highlights the widespread assumption that bodies have "a stable sex expressed through a stable gender . . . that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality" (p. 208). This matrix dovetails with more recent understandings of cisnormativity as the assumption that an individual's biological sex characteristics at birth will match with associated traditional gender performances throughout one's life (Worthen, 2016). In the 1980s and early 1990s, Ms. Avery's single status and exuberant displays of encouragement to both female and male students ran counter to normative sexual and gender scripts.

Enough with my haunted memories; you may be thinking, aren't we past all this? After all, *Degrassi* has been remade multiple times with an increasing roster of LGBTQ characters. Indeed, in the subsequent decades since this episode's airing, there have been fairly successful political movements aiming for increased acceptance of homosexuality by

downplaying difference (Warner, 1999). A reduction in difference pacifies stigma but is also limited in challenging the norms that instantiated difference in the first place. In the early 2000s, American studies scholar Lisa Duggan (2002) identified that greater tolerance of homosexuality was owed, in large part, to the emergence of a “new homonormativity” comprised of “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (p. 179). Years of “equal rights” campaigns have fought for LGBTQ people’s integration into society as *normal* people. However, claims of normality must be demonstrated through adherence to dominant norms, such as marriage, monogamy, and domesticity (Warner, 1999). Homonormativity is no longer new. It has ushered in much greater LGBTQ representation in forms that no longer raise eyebrows thanks to an overarching emphasis on sameness. While Ms. Avery’s question of whether homosexuality makes a difference seemed cutting-edge in the 1980s, this tired message replays across seasons of *Queer Eye* (2018–) in ways that affirm the importance of affluence and normative attractiveness in bids for acceptance.

Despite this trend toward downplaying difference, coming out—as a ritual of disclosing sexual identity—has not gone away. Institutions and social roles still call on individuals to claim a particular sexual identity, which allows for them to be categorized and rationalized into societal structures (Foucault, 1978/1990). As Goffman (1968) observed, people are expected to disclose their stigma in order to realign others’ assumptions and avoid being discredited as lying or hiding what makes them different. But aside from seeming well adjusted or honest, coming out is also a step toward blending in. Within a neoliberal context that prizes individual rights and freedoms (Richardson, 2005), coming out enables some individuals to adopt normative identity scripts and forms of consumption that allow them to move through life much like anyone else. Nonheterosexuality is thus seen as an individual struggle that can be addressed through coming out, which allows LGBTQ people to transition into self-acceptance and recognition as consumer citizens.

Some scholars and media pundits posit that coming out and LGBTQ visibility may now be trivial matters. They assert that we have entered a “post-gay era,” which allows an individual to dissociate from homosexual stereotypes and “define oneself by more than sexuality” (Ghaziani, 2014, p. 102). However, those who are most able to sidestep explicitly coming out quite often possess other qualities in alignment with dominant ideologies (such as patriarchy and white supremacy) and normative standards of

ability and socioeconomic status (McNaron, 2007; Nash, 2013). That is to say, men who are white, able-bodied, and of high socioeconomic status have a much easier time than women, people of color, people with disabilities, and those with lower incomes in coming across as *normal*, even if they are gay. And as the term *post-gay* implies, sexual identities that have seen less integration into popular culture and less commercialization than (cisgender male) gay identities remain steeped in difference, which fuels stigma and necessitates coming out.

But coming out carries both transformative potential and risk. It could bring about changes in attitudes, institutions, and societal structures as it challenges heteronormativity. This capacity to facilitate change is especially potent when carried out collectively, such as through coalitional movements that attach gay or queer liberation to intersecting fights for freedom from racial and class discrimination (Cohen, 2005). This sort of confrontational coming out, however, carries the risk of punishment and backlash, from social isolation to discrimination. It also tends to involve grand gestures, occurring momentarily when people choose to become involved in political moments.

Much more commonly, people come out in everyday moments, such as when I call to clarify my spouse's gender on shared bills. These moments can also be transformative, as acts of "everyday activism" (Vivienne, 2016a) that disrupt assumptions a little at a time, and they remain risky for the challenge they pose to the status quo. Refusing to erase difference means putting one's seamless participation in institutions of labor, the family, and consumption—the trappings of life within neoliberal citizenship—in peril. With these risks in mind, many LGBTQ people engage in what sociologist Jason Orne (2011) calls "strategic outness": a context-specific approach to determining whether or not to disclose one's sexual identity. As we will see, coming out happens through small and large gestures across platforms. While my *Degrassi* memories are rife with sweaty nightmare scenes of having to conceal sexual identity, a very different landscape of LGBTQ representation abounds across social media.

Digital Disclosure

To understand the role of social media platforms and apps in the disclosure of highly personal information, it is useful to return to Goffman's ideas, as many media scholars have done (Blackwell et al., 2015; Hogan, 2010; Lim et al., 2012; Papacharissi, 2009; Vitak, 2012). Goffman (1959) applied a dramaturgical model to social interactions, viewing individuals as actors

in performances taking place across the different stages, or contexts, of our lives. He differentiated between front-stage performances—those tailored to particular audiences—and less curated expressions in backstage regions away from these audiences, which allow for performances to be relaxed, rehearsed, or even contravened. People experiencing stigma may be “living a life that can be collapsed at any moment” (Goffman, 1963, p. 109) should their stigmatized quality be revealed in front-stage regions. Communication scholar Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) identifies that electronic media alter these regions by dislodging social exchanges from their embeddedness in physical space. This gives rise to new social situations without such clean-cut boundaries for interaction, sometimes merging audiences or giving front-stage audiences a sneak peek at the backstage, such as when TV reporters conduct home interviews with politicians or celebrities.

Social media’s affordances have the potential to disrupt these regions even further. One of the first scholars to examine teenagers’ behavior on MySpace and later Facebook, danah boyd (2014) extends Meyrowitz’s ideas to understand how social media present new opportunities and challenges for social interaction. She describes how social media facilitate “networked publics” that are “simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (p. 8). While I will reflect further on how identity modulation can give rise to networked publics in chapter 4, I wish to underscore boyd’s observation that networked publics often bring together disparate audiences. She identifies social media as affording increased persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability to the content with which such audiences circulate and interact (though these affordances vary depending on the platform). As such, there is a much higher likelihood that front- and backstage regions will merge compared to earlier media formats. Boyd refers to this as “context collapse,” which “occurs when people are forced to grapple simultaneously with otherwise unrelated social contexts that are rooted in different norms and seemingly demand different social responses” (p. 31). While stigmatized individuals are often already conscious of the potential for contexts to collapse, social media generate new situations with a high propensity for this to occur.

Fortunately, people can adapt their approaches to personal disclosure to deal with the possibility of context collapse. Since the audience for a social media post may be unknowable, especially on publicly searchable platforms like Twitter, individuals tend to tailor their expressions to an “imagined audience” (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Researcher Eden Litt (2012)

describes the imagined audience as the “mental conceptualization” of others with whom one is interacting. She notes that this concept builds on Benedict Anderson’s (1983) pivotal definition of “imagined communities” being comprised of those who may not be known in person but with whom one assumes a shared commonality or connection, such as among citizens of the same nation. Therefore, social media users employ their skills and motivations to craft posts that resonate most with the audiences they imagine as their ideal recipients. Teenagers often post lyrics or other encoded texts that only mean something to particular audiences (Marwick & boyd, 2014). On YouTube, many creators adjust access to their videos in relation to the level of personal detail included in them (Lange, 2007). These examples reflect strategies for targeting audiences and adjusting the level of information disclosed.

When people tailor their self-representations, they tend to view a platform as a specific social context, reconstructing the boundaries of this particular stage. Studies of teenagers’ disclosures on social media reveal that they deploy personal information in alignment with a platform’s social norms—that is, they anticipate that others will view and interpret their posts within the platform’s context (Livingstone, 2008; Marwick & boyd, 2014). This practice highlights a definition of privacy as “having control over who knows what about you” (Livingstone, 2008, p. 404). This definition resonates with contemporary understandings of privacy as functioning in relation to norms that govern personal information flows in social contexts (Nissenbaum, 2009). Information scientist Helen Nissenbaum (2009) asserts that new technologies often violate such “contextual integrity” as they disrupt these information norms, often distributing information beyond what people perceive to be the context for their sharing. Seeming eerily predictive of today’s social media, Meyrowitz (1985) similarly identified the importance of information flows, noting: “The dividing line between backstage and onstage is informational, not necessarily physical” (p. 39). Privacy, then, becomes a matter of managing what other people know about you and maintaining the context for this information, ensuring that it reaches intended audiences and not others.

These approaches to maintaining privacy, in the sense of *who* knows *what*, are common throughout this book. However, my main concern is not with the management of privacy but with what is disclosed. I focus on how such information is deployed, shaped by the platform, and received by others. I want to note, though, that personal disclosures on social media are not often public, if we think about publicness as the flip side of a contextual definition of privacy. If public information is intended for viewing across multiple contexts, audiences, and interpretative norms, then the personal

information shared in specific platform contexts constitutes something different.³ The disclosures of sexual identity throughout this book are not private, in the sense of being locked down or suppressed, but nor are they public in this broader sense. They are personal: shared through particular symbols, resonating with specific audiences, and intended to evoke certain outcomes when communicated in ways that include an element of control over their delivery.⁴

Similar to how the multiple elements of signal processing are indiscernible when a fully mastered sound is produced, self-representations of identity on social media often appear as personal expressions without immediately noticeable platform influences. However, in relation to networked publics, privacy also becomes networked, since platforms' features and functions are always changing in tandem with evolving user norms and fluctuating audiences (Marwick and boyd, 2014). Further, new media scholar José van Dijck (2013) argues that platforms are microsystems of constitutive elements that shape sociality. These elements include users, technology, and content as platforms' "techno-cultural constructs" (p. 28), and they feature prominently in those studies of networked publics and context collapse mentioned earlier. But van Dijck also identifies elements that comprise platforms' "socioeconomic structures" (p. 28), including their ownership, governance, and business models. Recognizing these multiple elements of platform influence enables a nuanced examination that moves beyond the initial seamlessness of a Tinder profile, Instagram photo, or Vine video to identify how individuals and platforms together form these reflections of identity.

Identity modulation is a process by which people, together with platforms, negotiate the gray area between being private and public with personal information. On the user's side, identity modulation involves disclosure through approaches that tailor content to imagined audiences within a platform's context. Beyond approaches to preserving privacy, identity modulation is very much about putting personal information *out there*. Platforms shape these disclosures through much more than their features and functionality, as their economic imperatives and governing decisions also affect individuals' self-representations. As something that is not entirely considered public or private, sexual identity is an apt quality through which to examine identity modulation. There is an imperative to come out in order to participate fully in social and economic life, and yet nonheterosexuality is still often relegated to private spaces to downplay its difference from heterosexuality. As a digitally mediated process through which indicators of personal, potentially stigmatized identifiers are deployed and treated on platforms, identity modulation is not necessarily

limited to displays of sexual identity. However, LGBTQ people's legacy of managing the information they convey is useful for understanding how digital technologies shape processes of disclosure.

DYNAMICS OF IDENTITY MODULATION

In some senses, identity modulation is not new. Individuals have been making decisions about how and to whom they present their personal information for a very long time. Similarly, digital technologies have shaped these processes in all sorts of ways over recent decades. Returning to the metaphor of sound, recall that modulation can affect a sound wave's frequency or amplitude. In terms of personal disclosure, identity modulation alters certain dynamics relating to the communication of personal information. These dynamics include (a) *personal identifiability*, as the other identifying information conveyed alongside the personal disclosure; (b) the *reach* of a personal disclosure across audiences and platforms; and (c) the *salience* of the personal disclosure to one's audiences. In the following discussion of each dynamic, it becomes clear that identity modulation is an emergent process between users and technology. This process occurred with previous forms of digital media, but it takes on a particular shape with regard to the platforms and apps examined in this book.

Personal Identifiability

People become personally identifiable when multiple pieces of information about them are aggregated or when a specific piece of information is circulated that conveys one's likeness across contexts or acquaintances. Personal identifiability can be conceived as a spectrum, from complete anonymity to legal, social, and visual recognizability. People self-represent variably along this spectrum in different contexts. For example, in a bank you may present identification with your legal name and a vivid photo of your face, whereas when entering a local coffeeshop you may be known socially to some as their neighbor, but your legal name and other information are left out of this situation. Digital technologies come with features, functionalities, policies, and profit motives that encourage users to self-represent more toward one end of this spectrum or the other. Users also develop norms and etiquette for identifiability. In terms of personal information that identifies us across contexts or to a range of audiences, one's name, face, and location are key pieces of information.

Several scholars have dispelled the notion that early text-based digital technologies enabled complete anonymity and fluid performances of the self (Baym, 2015; Daniels, 2009; Nakamura, 2002). However, many of these technologies allowed individuals to be less personally identifiable through the use of pseudonyms and a lack of photo-sharing functionality. People often took advantage of this to divulge personal information, sharing intimate details that allowed them to form platonic, romantic, and sexual connections. Pseudonyms could even contain provocative and intimate information. Research on gay men's use of the French Minitel—a precursor to the internet—found that their pseudonyms contributed to the eroticization of interactions, indicating physical qualities (e.g., weight, penis size) and location (Livia, 2002). Pseudonyms tightly packed with information resembled the density of newspaper personals (Beauman, 2011), since time on the Minitel was expensive and every character had to count. These men were not completely anonymous in their voluntary sharing of some identifying information, but their lack of personal identifiability regarding legal names and visual semblance allowed for greater freedom in expressing sexual desires. In contrast, a lesbian Minitel community that was focused on political organizing over romantic or sexual interactions compelled members to post using their first names rather than pseudonyms. This expectation of what historian Tamara Chaplin (2014) calls “nominative transparency” (p. 467) was established among users to further their goal of extending offline lesbian communities through the Minitel. While personal identifiability can be rendered more malleable through a technology's features, it is also contingent on norms and expectations that develop with appropriation of these features.

Sentiments regarding “transparency” and “authenticity” in relation to names can also be instilled by technology developers. Facebook provides a well-known example (Raynes-Goldie, 2010), as its early requirement for users to belong to a university or formal organization mandated using a name that was recognizable across these contexts. In public statements, Facebook has associated one's “real” or “authentic” name with transparency. The platform's discursive and programmed requirements for consistent identifiability elide how using a single name across online exchanges facilitates highly profitable data mining and targeted advertising while stymying the management of stigmatized personal information. These requirements pose particularly intensive challenges for LGBTQ people, such as drag queens who wish to self-promote through performer accounts without linking to their nonperformer identities (Lingel & Golub, 2015). Similarly, transgender people may experience difficulties creating a new Facebook account post-transition, since names are often verified through

a driver's license or other documents controlled by institutions that often refuse to recognize transgender identities as legitimate (Cavalcante, 2016). Facebook's name policy combines with its features, algorithms, and automated notifications, leading to a situation that anthropologist Alexander Cho (2017) describes as "default publicness." He underscores that default publicness is particularly damaging for marginalized populations, such as queer youth of color, who are often put in socially, emotionally, and economically precarious situations when unintentionally outed through Facebook's design choices.

While text-based digital technologies were not devoid of bodies—physiques, gender expressions, and race all permeated interactions—today's platforms and apps predominantly feature visual media. The functionality for posting photos or videos has become fused with user expectations of being able to see another person's likeness, not just an avatar or symbol. The common practice of taking and posting selfies—using a mobile phone's front-facing camera to capture an image of one's likeness—is often associated with authentic self-representation, since digital photography's accuracy gives the sense that such images are difficult to fake (Tiidenberg, 2018). Since visual self-representation can also serve to affiliate one with a particular group—to self-identify as an insider—it has been an important mode of signaling sexual identity (Frolic, 2001). By including fashion, symbols, or other references to LGBTQ culture, photos have the capacity to replace the words usually associated with coming out. Faces and unique marks on bodies, such as tattoos or birthmarks, make individuals highly identifiable across contexts. But again, unique qualities can be edited or left out of photos, and physical likeness can be communicated without one's face, such as through the "torso pics" that flood Grindr, an app popular with men seeking men.

A person's home or workplace can easily become associated with their name, daily patterns, or other facets of life. Early internet technologies were thought to decouple physical place from digital interactions (Correll, 1995; Quiroz, 2013), but contemporary platforms often incorporate geolocate information automatically. Just like visual appearance, location may be important to signaling sexual identity—indicating arrival at a gay or lesbian venue—or to arranging interactions with other LGBTQ individuals. Geolocate apps can overlay one's sense of physical surroundings and digital interactions, giving rise to what mobile media scholars Larissa Hjorth and Sun Sun Lim (2012) term "mobile intimacy": closeness fostered with others encountered across these blurred public and private boundaries of geographic and electronic space. Studies show that the digital-physical overlay facilitated through mobile applications can help LGBTQ people

identify each other, even when physically situated in spaces perceived to be heteronormative (Blackwell et al., 2015; Tang, 2017). Depending on the platform, one may be able to adjust the precision of locational information or obscure their relationship to their current whereabouts. However, the automated processing and display of this information can make it challenging to contain and even dangerous, such as when dating apps are used in countries with laws against homosexuality.

Reach

Many scholars have highlighted the capacity of networked digital technology to broaden the flow of information to vast audiences (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Castells, 2009), ushering in an age of “spreadable media” that empowers users to collaboratively create, share, and widely circulate media (Jenkins et al., 2013). Anthropologist Mary L. Gray’s (2009) foundational work on the mediated lives of rural queer youth demonstrates the importance of this spreadability. She examines how queer youth who are distant from urban metropolises with larger LGBTQ populations garner representations of LGBTQ identity from media, including websites and social media. As youth develop a sense of sexual identity, digital media also facilitates sharing these identities with select audiences before trying them out in local, physical spaces. Digital media’s cross-geographic reach and its affordances for connecting with friendly audiences are pivotal for this identity development. However, the tendency for social media to collapse contexts can also mean that reach is a dynamic to be managed. People may attempt to manage the reach of their personal information by communicating one on one (e.g., through messaging apps), targeting select audiences within a platform, or circulating self-representations of sexual identity across platforms. Concurrently, platforms’ affordances and commercial arrangements often facilitate a high level of spreadability across audiences. Through identity modulation, users and platforms shape who sees personal disclosures and how far they spread across networks.

Alongside several scholars (see, e.g., Carrasco & Kerne, 2018; Cassidy, 2018; DeVito et al., 2018; Hanckel et al., 2019; Szulc & Dhoest, 2013), my previous research has focused on how LGBTQ individuals manage the reach of information about their sexual identity (Duguay, 2016a). I have found it useful to think about approaches in terms of what sociologists Jenny Davis and Nathan Jurgenson (2014) have called *context collusions* and *context collisions*. In interviews with LGBTQ university students about their sexual identity disclosures on Facebook, I found that a few made prominent coming-out

posts, constituting “context collisions” through which the information was distributed intentionally and expediently across audiences. However, it was more common for individuals to develop strategies for sharing information about sexual identity to some audiences and not others. They expended great effort to avoid “context collisions” wherein information was unintentionally spread across contexts. Similarly, a team of Australian researchers (Hanckel et al., 2019) found that LGBTQ youth employ “identity curation” to manage the boundaries of sharing with family, colleagues, and friends on social media. Youth often posted about sexual identity on platforms unpopulated by the audiences they were not yet out to. In my study (Duguay, 2016a), I similarly found that some participants chose to post more about their sexual identity on platforms like Tumblr, which their parents might not know existed and presumably did not know how to use. Both our studies identified that LGBTQ youth applied stringent criteria for connecting with others, manipulated their content’s visibility, and became experts on platforms’ privacy features to manage reach.

Algorithms often affect whether and under what circumstances platform audiences see content (Bucher, 2012; Gillespie, 2012). For example, Facebook has tweaked its News Feed algorithm several times, declaring in 2019 that it would prioritize content from friends (presumably over organizations or businesses) based on “signals like how often [users] interact with a given friend, how many mutual friends they have and whether they mark someone as a close friend” (Facebook, 2019). Tinder also serves up the profiles of potential dates based on a special algorithm, which considers user activity and preferences while adjusting to who swipes on your profile (Tinder, 2019). While platform companies give some indications of what their algorithms consider in sorting content, they often remain vague in the name of intellectual property. As Tinder puts it, “We cannot disclose *all* of our secret sauce.”

Platforms and apps function in interconnected ways, comprising what media scholars José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal (2018) describe as a “platform ecosystem” (p. 4). They explain how massive “infrastructural platforms,” like Amazon or Google, perform the role of gatekeepers who collect and manage flows of data that are valuable to other apps, businesses, and service providers that users access within the platform ecosystem. For example, Tinder allows users to log in through Facebook, an infrastructural platform that has already collected vast amounts of user information, creating a strong informational dependency between these two entities. The bulk of social media activity in the Global North occurs on a limited number of large corporately owned platforms originating within the United States (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Media studies scholar Dal Yong Jin (2015) powerfully argues that the concentration of markets, intellectual property, users, and cultural flows into a small number of select platforms gives rise to “platform imperialism,” as it “concentrate[s] capital into the hands of a few U.S.-based platform owners, resulting in the expansion of the global divide” (p. 12). Dominant platforms often purchase up-and-coming apps, such as Facebook’s acquisition of Instagram and WhatsApp, further concentrating markets and the data collected through these apps. They also deploy spin-off apps to capture a different portion of the market or to offer functionalities apart from their core services, as was the case with Twitter’s release of Vine for sharing short videos. This integration among platforms poses hurdles for individuals in treating any single platform as a contained context.

Salience

The final dynamic of identity modulation involves how salient personal disclosures are as self-representations that reflect upon a person’s identity. Salience relates to how recognizable this information is to others and, specifically, who recognizes it. This dynamic expands upon Marwick and boyd’s (2014) concept of social steganography, a practice in which social media users make posts with certain phrases, images, or other cues in plain sight, banking on only certain members of their audiences possessing the insider knowledge necessary to understand the underlying message. Highly salient self-representations rely on signals of identity that are easily recognizable, whereas less salient self-representations may be vague. In relation to sexual identity, salience can range from, for example, a clear declaration of “I am gay” to a rainbow emoji that is more ambiguous due to its use by allies and other movements.

Media and audiences rely on stereotypes as representations that are recognizable due to their systematic and recurrent presentation across broadcast formats. Communications scholar Ellen Seiter (2017) explains that although stereotypes can be damaging when they suggest that all people within a (perceived, constructed, or self-designated) group are a certain way, they also provide “models of available social identities” (p. 184). Their recurrent images and social norms teach us how to affiliate ourselves with these identities. This logic resonates with assertions that cultural enactments of gender and sexual identity can be learned and performed (Butler, 1990; Plummer, 1996). Learning how to perform a stereotype is what the stars of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009–) do when they strut the runway as embellished models of heterosexual femininity.

Stereotypes can function as heuristics for making sense of the world (Lippmann, 1922 cited in Seiter, 2017), enabling audiences to quickly recognize and sort people according to predetermined categories. Even if stereotypes tend to be overgeneralizations, we use them reflexively to reduce our cognitive load and respond to interactional norms. Stereotypical indicators of sexual identity may relate to gender expression, interests, and conduct, such as the stereotype of a lesbian as a masculine, plaid-wearing woman with a knack for fixing things. But stereotypes can change over time. As cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams (1977) observes, new cultural forms often emerge as the recombination of residual understandings with new meanings or knowledge. With media representations of sexual identity diversifying, figure 1.2 describes emergent stereotypes about lesbian and bisexual women, some of which retain masculine traits while adapting to new fashions.

On platforms, salient cultural symbols and stereotypes relating to identity fuse with digital elements. Users appropriate digital technologies in what digital media scholar Jean Burgess (2006) has coined “vernacular creativity,” as everyday remediations of cultural resources that become “recognizable because of their familiar elements, and create affective impact through the innovative process of recombination” (p. 206). As people participate in vernacular creativity, they demonstrate digital skills alongside insider knowledge of the cultural signals being mobilized, which constitute not only popular cultural knowledge but also an understanding of platform cultures. Being adept in digital culture has become so integral to engaging with others that scholars have begun reconceptualizing digital literacy in light of this (Gleason, 2018; Kanai, 2016; Wargo, 2015). Being digitally

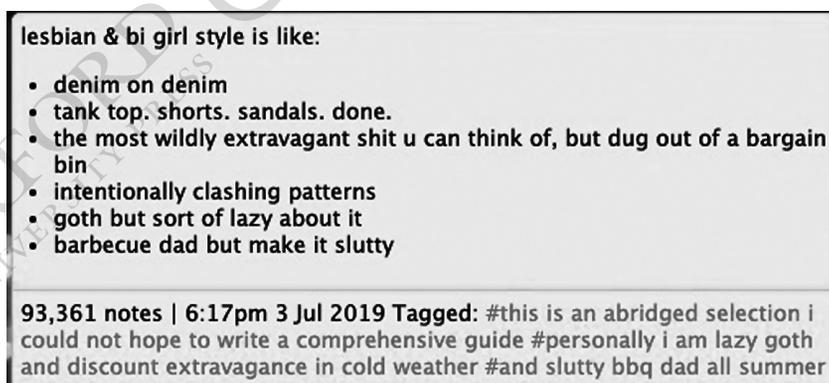


Figure 1.2 Tumblr user post discussing recognizable fashion trends among lesbian and bisexual women, July 3, 2019. Source: <https://chthonicillness.tumblr.com/post/186034735896>.

literate means not only being able to use the latest technologies but also being able to understand and participate in the norms and practices of emergent digital cultures.

Tailoring identity-related content so that it becomes salient to desired social media audiences therefore involves both conventional indicators of identity and elements of digital culture. If we understand digital culture to involve technological affordances and the cultures of use that emerge from their appropriation, digital culture can assume a wide array of forms. Memes, emoji, and hashtags are some of the most prominent elements of digital culture featured throughout this book. Memes are representations that users share and creatively build on in ways that establish boundaries between in-groups, who understand the message or joke, and out-groups, who may not get the joke or may even be its target (Miltner, 2018). For example, some Pride-related memes use image macro templates to critique corporations for their commercial co-optation of these celebrations (Dockray, 2019). They draw boundaries between queer activists and corporate entities, many of whom miss the critique if they do not recognize the memetic format or take it seriously as a cultural expression. Hashtags also combine digital functionality—the # that hyperlinks and categorizes content—with user-created expressions. While hashtags can gather users in dialogue about a particular topic or help to form communities (Bruns & Burgess, 2015), they can also be reflective of individual identity (Highfield & Leaver, 2015). This will become apparent in later analysis of Instagram and Vine hashtags.

Emoji differ from these other elements of digital culture due to limited user control over their visual design. While originating as user-generated keyboard punctuation, emoji have been incorporated into Unicode Standard format, which is an international specification for character sets across hardware and software (Unicode Inc., 2019). Unicode Standard was developed, and is maintained, by the Unicode Consortium, a nonprofit organization comprised of technology corporations (e.g., Apple, Google, Facebook), governments, researchers, and other donors. Communications scholars Luke Stark and Kate Crawford (2015) describe how emoji are centralized through the Unicode Standard but differentiated in their design through platform and device-specific fonts, which remain corporate intellectual property. While users interpret emoji in multiple ways, Stark and Crawford argue that emoji generate “information capital” (p. 8) for platforms as they instrumentalize and standardize affect—the emotions and sentiments that emoji convey—to render it into trackable, monetizable data.

This standardization includes the replication of stereotypes through emoji. The Unicode emoji “two women holding hands” () appears often

in self-representations throughout this book, providing an apt example of gender stereotypes that become “baked in” to technological designs (Bivens & Haimson, 2016). While many queer women whom I interviewed adopted this emoji as shorthand for same-gender attraction, it does not reflect these women’s diversity. Across platforms, its figures display feminine haircuts and clothing (e.g., skirts). They appear with a yellow skin tone by default, while other skin tones were only added with subsequent updates (Miltner, 2020). Sometimes the women are even identical, as in Facebook’s version, precluding their use to indicate attraction to another woman. In light of these options, Mozilla’s depiction appears to be the most progressive, since it includes a short-haired woman who is also wearing pants—revolutionary!

Emoji provide insight into just one of many ways that platforms shape the salience of self-representations conveying personal information. Some aesthetics, behaviors, or self-expressions may be more common on certain platforms, stemming from a “platform vernacular” (Gibbs et al., 2016) that interweaves affordances and user practices in a “unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics” (p. 257). The salience of sexual identity disclosures may become lost within a platform vernacular, such as how Pride selfies posted to Instagram may be interpreted as showing off the festival’s aesthetics in response to the platform’s visual emphasis rather than making a personal statement. On the other hand, self-representations of sexual identity may become part of the platform vernacular, like YouTube’s burgeoning genre of “coming out” videos (Alexander & Losh, 2010). While these are highly salient expressions, leaving little ambiguity in their messages, their popularity may also draw questions about authenticity, individuality, and whether one is just joining in for the attention (Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

Overall, the salience of personal disclosures on social media depend on individuals’ self-representations, the cultural and digital literacy of their audiences, and platforms’ cultures of use and affordances. In referring to “affordances” throughout this book, I invoke ecological and design understandings of what artifacts or technologies enable people to do (Gibson, 1979; Norman, 1988), with “constraints” as a shorthand for the opposite of affordances. I also have in mind updates to the concept regarding digital media technologies, which view affordances as stemming from users’ everyday practices; the combined layers of hardware, operating system/interface, and apps on a device; and the complex and ever-changing relationship between platforms and users (Bucher & Helmond, 2017; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015). Communications scholars Peter Nagy and Gina Neff (2015) describe “imagined affordances” as those

that “evoke the imagination of both users and designers” (p. 1)—these individuals may not be fully aware of their expectations or anticipated uses of technologies, but such imaginings become instantiated in a technology’s actual design and use. The authors’ elaborated definition highlights three aspects that I view as pivotal: “Imagined affordances emerge between *users*’ perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the *materiality* and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of *designers*” (p. 5, emphasis added). A platform’s user population, the materiality of its technological architecture (i.e., its stuff—features, functions, buttons, devices), and its designers, including developers and business owners, all contribute to the imagined affordances that affect how the platform features in the sharing and reception of personal disclosures.

A Framework for Identity Modulation

Identity modulation is the process by which these dynamics become modified and adjusted, or modulated, when individuals share personal disclosures on social media. Both the user and the platform play a role in the degree of personal identifiability, reach, and salience of information shared as it circulates through networked technology and (potentially) across audiences from multiple social contexts. Figure 1.3 gives a sense of the extent to which these dynamics can be modulated: personal identifiability can range from anonymity to full legal, social, and visual identifiability; reach can span from one-on-one interactions to one-to-many formats across audiences within the same platform or across platforms; and salience can vary from ambiguity and unnoticeability to an absolutely clear declaration of identity that is widely recognizable. However, this is a general illustration, as the degrees of each dynamic are relative to the context and situation. For example, one’s face may not be personally identifying

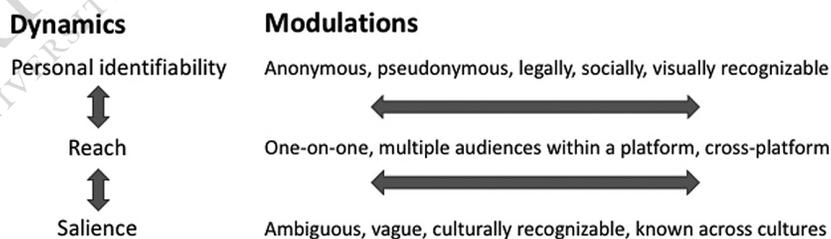


Figure 1.3 Identity modulation framework.
Source: Illustration by author

when used in a dating app profile while traveling in the same way that it would be when using the app in one's small hometown.

Identity modulation's dynamics are often adjusted in relation to each other. One might be apt to include details that increase personal identifiability if a self-representation's reach is limited. In turn, if a personal disclosure's salience is low, and only certain audiences will *get* how it reflects on the individual, then one might choose to extend its reach by making the post public. However, platforms often default toward compiling users' information to heighten their identifiability and extending the reach of user activity in the name of sharing.

I have previously worked with the ideas of reach and salience in considering the impact of sexual identity representations on social media (Duguay, 2016b). Examining representations of Ruby Rose, an LGBTQ celebrity, I theorized about the capacity for a self-representation to garner engagement. When could Rose's social media posts make a statement or inspire others to share about their sexual identity? I drew on the work of media scholar Anastasia Kavada (2015), who asserts, "Conversations are what social media are designed for and where they draw their power from" (p. 1). She underscores that although platforms are now the "architects of conversations," as developers and administrators of these networked technologies, users can also find empowerment in the conversations they spark. Some of Ruby Rose's social media posts were strikingly salient in their queerness, lending themselves to powerful conversations in fan responses and media coverage, while others appeared to be absorbed in Instagram's platform vernacular of glamorous photos.

Situating these ideas within the framework of identity modulation allows me to extend and move beyond discussions of LGBTQ visibility and media representation. Sometimes discussions of visibility focus on what is or is not there. Indeed, this is important, since minorities missing from view cannot be acknowledged, let alone attempt to rupture the dominant structures that invisibilize them. Across many countries and online, media visibility in this sense is no longer a problem for LGBTQ people. In fact, communication scholar Kevin Barnhurst (2007) observed that the proliferation of queer visibility is a double-edged sword: with greater visibility comes the potential for commercialization and assimilation that risks "converting radicalism into a market niche" (p. 1). As such, many pivotal critiques of LGBTQ media visibility highlight its commercialized and homonormative qualities (Gross, 2001; Ng, 2013). Moving from broader media representation to self-representation through contemporary digital media, investigating individuals, their connections, and the technologies they use warrants a different lens for analysis. Identity modulation and

its dynamics allow for a granular examination of what is happening when individuals make their sexual identity visible through social media—what they do, how they manage it, and to what degree it is visible—understanding visibility not as a binary but a spectrum. Further, identity modulation makes space for examining the role of social media platforms as co-arbiters of visibility through their affordances, politics, economic interests, and cultures of use.

Given this multifaceted approach to understanding personal disclosure, this framework proposes a departure from the notion of visibility,⁵ and its association with what can be seen, toward an auditory metaphor of modulation that elucidates identity negotiations between individuals and platforms. Through this research, I have noticed that the impact of personal disclosures made through social media come not merely from their visibility but from their contributions to pivotal conversations. To attain this, individuals need to have a sense of agency in modulating their disclosures. People must possess an ability to adjust their degree of personal identifiability, the reach of their content, and the salience of their personal disclosures in order to invoke such outcomes. They need to be heard, in their own voice and by those they want to hear them. Many examples throughout these chapters illustrate the tension that occurs when platforms complicate or refuse individuals' attempts at identity modulation. These instances open up possibilities for imagining the radical outcomes that may be realized in a world where social media truly empower people to express themselves as digital citizens.

METHODS AND IDENTITIES IN THE MIDDLE

Similar to how signal processing happens in the “middle of media” (Sterne & Rodgers, 2011, p. 35), identity modulation occurs in the middle of digital self-representation. Tackling its apparent seamlessness requires a research approach in the middle of bodies of knowledge, methods, and aspects of identity. This book is situated within the multidisciplinary fields of internet studies and digital media studies while drawing from scholarly studies of media, literature, sociology, sexuality, gender, and race. My research adopted mixed methods combining traditional interview and textual analysis approaches with digital methods, as ways of examining “born digital” artifacts (Berry, 2011), from individual posts to entire platforms. I also scoped this research around queer women's self-representations, understanding queer women to be often in the middle—or forgotten—in terms of research, LGBTQ issues, and identity.

Breaking apart the seamlessness of digital self-representation required research methods examining the constitutive role of platforms, users, and social media content, which I expand on in the appendix. With Ben Light and Jean Burgess, I developed a systematic approach for analyzing apps called the “walkthrough method” (Light et al., 2018). This method enables the researcher to identify how an app guides users and shapes self-representations through its affordances and embedded cultural references. While we wrote about the method specifically in relation to apps (i.e., smartphone applications), I use this term interchangeably with “platform,” referring to services that provide technological scaffolding as well as governing and economic oversight for digitally mediated participation. The services examined in this research are predominantly engaged with as apps, offering reduced functionality through desktop versions. I applied the walkthrough method to Tinder, Instagram, and Vine, three apps with a volume of content created and circulated by queer women in 2014–17 when I conducted this research.

The internet’s vast troves of queer content certainly posed challenges for choosing particular apps to focus on. However, these apps stood out as situating queer women’s activity within their broader mainstream uptake, necessitating the negotiation of self-representations in relation to the mix of users who may intercept them. In contrast to LGBTQ-specific apps, they also present features and functionalities that were not necessarily developed with queer users in mind. In addition to this rationale, I was already on these apps, noticing the concentration in queer women’s activity that was largely absent from other spaces in my life. As a dating app largely marketed toward heterosexual users, Tinder caught my attention for the range of profiles created by women seeking women. Instagram, a predominantly photo-based app that later added video functionality, was exploding with queer content and controversy, as LGBTQ celebrities increasingly signed on, while users called for less censorship of women’s bodies, such as through the expanding #freethenipple campaign. Vine was an overwhelming sensory experience with many similarities to a more contemporary video-based app, TikTok (a connection I return to in the book’s conclusion). Released in 2013, three years following Instagram’s debut, Vine’s affordances for anonymity, lesser-known status, and relaxed policies attracted youth and users looking for a different experience. As Vines—the short looping videos people created—were easily embedded across other platforms and websites, the app’s user base grew rapidly (Bennett, 2013). While rumors of platforms becoming defunct are sometimes treated as the horror stories of digital media studies, threatening to render research obsolete, I feel fortunate to have immersed myself in queer female

Viners' content while the app was thriving. Their activity, along with my observations of Vine's promotional materials, policies, and updates, allowed for building an archive that could no longer be pieced together due to the app's discontinuation and fragmentation of any remaining content. This archive demonstrates the app's vibrant queer exchanges, its users' creativity, and its opportunities and constraints for self-representation. These findings only gain relevance as new and existing apps integrate similar affordances, especially relating to short videos, and see comparable uses.

My experiences on these apps spurred me to turn a research lens on them, combining walkthrough materials with analysis of queer women's content and experiences. I used digital tools (when available) and applied textual and visual analysis (McKee, 2003; Rose, 2012) to examine content tagged with queer women's hashtags across Instagram and Vine, as well as Tinder profiles gathered with consent. I supplemented this analysis with the experiences, opinions, insights, and aims of queer women whom I interviewed about their self-representation on these platforms. Gathering participants from LGBTQ networks and directly through these apps, I interviewed ten Tinder users, eight Instagrammers, and two Viners from across several countries and subject positions. This combined analysis, involving close investigation of apps, hundreds of social media posts, and twenty interviews, provides the basis for this book's theory building around identity modulation. Although social media technologies and their uses are always changing, alongside shifts in meanings and symbols attached to sexual identity, this research aims toward theoretical transferability to provide insights into future configurations of people and technology.

While I have outlined how a focus on sexual identity brings to light processes of identity modulation, there is an urgency to studying LGBTQ self-representation, especially queer women's self-representation. Across many countries, LGBTQ people have attained protection from harassment and murder and, to a lesser extent, established the right to adopt children and have their relationships legally recognized (Nunez, 2016). While working on this project, history was made when the Australian parliament voted in favor of recognizing same-sex marriage in 2017. However, this decision was only reached after a nonbinding postal survey, inviting the entire population to weigh in on the rights of a minority. Months of heated discussion, worry, and publicly broadcasted lobbying that demonized homosexuality took a toll on LGBTQ communities, instilling fear, sorrow, and weariness (Hunt, 2018). I witnessed the stress of this uncertainty firsthand, seeing the toll it took on my partner as she waited and wondered if her family members would vote yes.

The politics of countries where I have resided have taught me that the myths of “progress” are that it is linear and has an endpoint. Yes, Australia has legalized same-sex marriage, but there have been multiple physical assaults against attendees at Sydney’s Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, the country’s largest Pride festival, in subsequent years (Dias, 2019). Yes, Canada introduced a commemorative coin boasting about equality (Harris, 2019), but Black Lives Matter activists highlight the continued profiling and police brutality against racialized queer and transgender people (Walcott, 2017). These fluctuations echo elsewhere and reinforce the stigmatization of nonheterosexual and noncisgender identities with grave impacts on people’s lives.

My least favorite part of researching sexual identity is dredging up evidence of just how pressingly we need to pay attention to the well-being, social connections, and experiences of LGBTQ people. Such research articles are often similar, as studies of sexual minorities from clinical, psychological, and health perspectives, and they are heartbreaking, since they show that LGBTQ people generally experience high rates of physical and mental health problems and are at higher risk of suicide than heterosexual, cisgender populations (Almeida et al., 2009; Goldblum et al., 2012; Gonzales et al., 2016; Haas et al., 2010; Lytle et al., 2014). Regarding queer women, studies show that they experience higher rates of mental health problems than heterosexual women (Colledge et al., 2015; Kerr et al., 2013). Bisexual and transgender women in particular experience high rates of distress, discrimination, and mental health issues (Leonard et al., 2015; Watson et al., 2018). Scholars refute the narrow, but surprisingly still common, thinking that an individual’s identification as LGBTQ *causes* these problems (Valdiserri et al., 2019). Instead, they underscore how enduring stigma against LGBTQ people creates stressful circumstances, such as family rejection or bullying, which can negatively impact mental health. Yes, some aspects of life have changed for LGBTQ people, especially in countries where their human rights are legally recognized, but there is no endpoint in sight in terms of the need to continue addressing these inequalities.

Despite this urgency, there is still a tangible lack of research about queer women across fields and especially within digital media studies. In the 1990s, literary scholar Terry Castle (1993) argued that the “lesbian” was an apparitional figure, barely noticeable across politics, media, and literature and overshadowed by gay men, subsumed by queer theory’s focus on male homosexuality. Luckily, there are now several brilliant scholars researching queer women’s media representation and indeed a handful researching queer women’s digital media, whom I cite frequently. However, there is

still an apparitional quality to this topic. Several foundational studies of sexuality and early digital media focus on gay men's chat rooms and discussion forums (Campbell, 2004; McGlotten, 2013; Mowlabocus, 2010), while mobile media's uptake has been matched by burgeoning literature about gay men's apps and social networks (Ahlm, 2016; Blackwell et al., 2015; Brubaker et al., 2016; Gudelunas, 2012; Licoppe et al., 2016; Roth, 2015). Several studies of LGBTQ people also lump us together, yielding findings unspecific to queer women. To help address this scholarly disparity, I provide a vivid account of queer women's digital self-representation, recognizing their experiences in their own right as well as what they can tell us more broadly about personal disclosures on social media.

Lastly, queer women—as the term implies—live within the intersection of sexual identity with a gender identity (female) that is often subject to systemic bias, alongside other elements of identity that may heighten experiences of discrimination and inequality. Black feminists stress the importance of addressing multiple forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism, and class injustice, which individuals experience in relation to overlapping identity positions (Combahee River Collective, 1986; Crenshaw, 1991). I take care to note how individuals' specific positionality matters for their identity modulation. Individual differences also combine with shared identifications, such as the shared experiences of women in this book as nonheterosexual and female, which sometimes put them at the crossroads of heterosexism and sexism or misogyny. Feminist efforts to counter gender inequalities have been subject to intense backlash, often occurring online, in the form of increasing attacks and harassment by “men's rights” and antifeminist groups (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Phillips, 2015). In identity modulation, personal information about one aspect of identity is often modulated in relation to other aspects of identity. Adjustments to one's personal identifiability or the reach of a self-representation may be made not only with indications of sexual identity in mind but also in light of how audiences will respond to coinciding expressions of gender or race. This is a pertinent time to focus on how queer women approach identity modulation, since their everyday experiences of social media are inextricably related to their personal self-representation while being situated within broader societal developments.

WHAT IDENTITY MODULATION DOES

The chapters that follow present a close analysis of the processes of identity modulation, in turn focusing on how platforms and individuals negotiate

the dynamics of personal identifiability, reach, and salience. The next chapter centers the negotiation of personal identifiability, as queer women respond to Tinder's importing of highly personally identifiable information from Facebook as a means for generating profiles intended to attest to others' trustworthiness. Queer women I spoke with found that these platform-generated identities were conducive to attempts at deception and misrepresentation by heterosexual men, women, and couples. They tended to increase the salience of sexual identity in their profiles to deter these users while signaling their intention to date other queer women, managing their reach and personal identifiability in light of this heightened salience. Their repeated and often stereotyped signaling of sexual identity gave rise to what Lindsay Ferris and I (2019) have termed a lesbian digital imaginary: the fusion of cultural and digital references to identity that are imagined to resonate with a shared community. While the lesbian digital imaginary drew some boundaries of exclusion, requiring individuals to demonstrate a particular cultural and digital literacy, it also enabled several women to connect and build trustworthiness as they added other modes of communication allowing for intimate, reliable self-representation.

Chapters 3 and 4 shift from Tinder's one-on-one exchanges to Instagram and Vine as public-facing platforms necessitating the negotiation of vast audiences. Chapter 3 focuses on reach, as it examines processes of identity modulation in queer women's self-branding. Instagram's filters and their association with hip and glamorous aesthetics, as well as Vine's 6.5-second looping video, combine with other digital affordances of these apps to provide users with the capacity to draw attention from others, heightening their reach by gathering a following. The queer women I interviewed responded to these affordances by modulating their reach in relation to salience through labor that integrated sexual identity into self-branding to support their day jobs, side gigs, or hobbies. These forms of labor included *intimate affective*, formulating relatable personal disclosures that convey intimate details; *developmental aesthetic*, the effort expended in acquiring and practicing skills necessary to create a persona or appearance that resonates with one's target audience; and *aspiring relational*, putting shared identity to work in attempts to build relationships with those who already have large followings. As these women enacted this labor, their production of personal and creative content gave rise to feelings of exploitation and alienation alongside opportunities for greater social and economic participation.

Chapter 4 looks at queer women's self-representation on Instagram and Vine from a different angle, uncovering how varying degrees of salience relating to sexual identity can give rise to particular kinds of publics

and counterpublics. I highlight the prominent representations of normatively feminine, white, slim, and glamorous women and lifestyles on queer women's Instagram hashtags as reflective of a networked intimate public that can provide a sense of community but remains fairly apolitical. This networked intimate public gives the impression that the "good life" of neoliberal citizenship is now attainable for those queer women who are able to perpetuate homonormative appearances. In contrast, queer women's circulation of highly salient representations of sexual identity on Vine in the form of thirst traps, intimate expressions, and counternormative discourse facilitated the formation of counterpublics. These counterpublics often circulated challenges to heterosexism, racism, and other forms of oppression, which were sometimes made visible through the platform's trending feature. However, the salience of these women's sexual identity made them targets for censorship, harassment, and discrimination on both Instagram and Vine. Platforms' policies and moderation processes failed to protect them, providing a patchwork of governing mechanisms insufficient to address populations of users who harness platform affordances to antagonize others.

With these chapters illustrating how, when individuals are able to steer it, identity modulation can contribute to the formation of relationships, greater social and economic participation, and discourses that challenge the status quo, the concluding chapter asserts the need for individuals to have greater agency over these processes. I analyze the hurdles that queer women encountered in their identity modulation, which implicate platforms' infrastructures, business models, and governance approaches as well as broader social, political, and economic influences. The narrow boundaries of digital imaginaries, the capacity for individuals to experience exploitation and undercompensation for their productive labor, and the patchwork platform governance that enables targeting vulnerable users are all complex problems for identity modulation. I propose that although there is not one simple solution, these issues can be addressed at multiple levels of platform design and economic arrangements, as well as through platforms taking responsibility for the cultures of use that thrive thanks to their policies and affordances. Given that identity modulation is not only applicable in the management of information about sexual identity but also integral to restoring context for intimate and personal disclosures on social media, I assert that identity modulation must be protected as a right within individuals' digital citizenship.