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Abstract

Recently, Brooklyn has seen an explosion of drag culture, with dozens of performers taking the stage in any given week. Social media plays a vital role for members of this community, simultaneously allowing self-promotion and community solidarity. Drawing on focus group interviews, we analyze the communication practices of Brooklyn's drag performers, examining both the advantages and drawbacks of social media platforms. Using conceptual frameworks of faceted identity and relational labor, our discussion focuses on affordance and constraints of multifaceted identity in online contexts and theories of seamful design. We contend that by analyzing online communication practices of drag performers, it becomes possible to identify gaps between embedded ideologies of mainstream social media technologies and the localized values of outsider communities.

Keywords

Online vs. Offline, sexuality, community

Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

In Face on Facebook: Brooklyn’s Drag Community and Sociotechnical Practices of Online Communication

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Recently, Brooklyn has seen an explosion of drag culture, with dozens of performers taking the stage in any given week. Social media plays a vital role for members of this community, simultaneously allowing self-promotion and community solidarity. Drawing on focus group interviews, we analyze the communication practices of Brooklyn’s drag performers, examining both the advantages and drawbacks of social media platforms. Using conceptual frameworks of faceted identity and relational labor, our discussion focuses on affordance and constraints of multifaceted identity in online contexts and theories of seamful design. We contend that by analyzing online communication practices of drag performers, it becomes possible to identify gaps between embedded ideologies of mainstream social media technologies and the localized values of outsider communities.

Keywords: Online vs. Offline, Sexuality, Community

Introduction

In the fall of 2014, a particular group of Facebook users leveraged media attention, political protests and threats of boycotting as part of a demand for technological parity. Their complaints were heartfelt, but not new: Facebook’s policies reflected particular assumptions of identity and communication that privileged some users over others, driving people who fall outside this scope to come up with hacks, tricks and workarounds to meet their needs. What made this particular set of demands more newsworthy was that Facebook had angered a highly visible set of performers whose accusations were easily sensationalized: drag queens. In keeping with its policy that users create profiles that correspond to their legal identities, Facebook had closed the accounts of a number of drag performers, provoking outrage, protests, and eventually an apology (see Change.org, 2014; Seals, 2014; Tracer, 2014). On October 2, 2014, Facebook announced their intention to overhaul a policy requiring people to use their “real” names, meaning a name verified by state-issued ID, such as a driver’s license. At stake in this debate are the politics of platforms (Gillespie, 2010), the gaps between the uses originally imagined for a given technology and the uses imagined by actual users.

In this paper, we address these gaps by examining the social media practices of Brooklyn’s drag community, focusing on the role of online technologies in the lives of drag performers, both as individual artists and as a queer community. Drawing on focus group interviews conducted in the year prior to Facebook’s policy reversal, our analysis offers an examination of what happens when intended use of a given technology runs up against unpredicted users, uses and workarounds. These divides between rules versus workarounds, intended design and actual use, are central to understanding how social media platforms facilitate, hinder, and complicate identity work and interpersonal communication. By looking at the practices and frustrations of a specific countercultural community – drag queens – our analysis contributes to online communication research on the social protocols that surface and normalize around technologies of everyday life (Jenkins, 2006, p.14), particularly as related to marginalized groups. Although issues of gender, sexuality, and identity work are critical to understanding these tensions of social media use, issues of labor and expectations of professionalism

are also crucial. Drag performers are tasked not only with fitting complex narratives of gender into rigid online interfaces, but with leveraging social media tools in service of personal, professional, and community objectives. While drag itself presents a dramatic form of complexity, there are more general layers of complexity around negotiating personal and professional life within a single platform. We argue that Facebook, like other dominant social media platforms, tends towards a design ethic of singularity and simplicity, fundamentally at odds with technological preferences (or needs) for complexity and mess. As a framework for conceptualizing the design ethics at stake in the context of both queer and professional identity, we link the social media practices of drag performers to the human computing interaction (HCI) concept of “seamfulness” (Weiser, 1994), suggesting a design framework that emphasizes the legibility (rather than the obfuscation) of multiple tools, functions, and facets within a single technical system. A key tension addressed by our work is the friction that emerges between dominant online platforms as sites of identity production and communication, and the experiences of drag queens, who require far more granularity and far less prescriptiveness than has typically been available with tools of interpersonal communication. That Facebook ultimately decided to change a longstanding policy on an issue as fundamental as identity as a result of drag performers’ coordinated protests is an indication of the technological and political stakes at work in these tensions and frictions.

Our paper proceeds as follows: To contextualize our project, we first introduce drag as a type of performance, and then situate the Brooklyn drag community within a larger queer history by describing sociotechnical factors that contribute to Brooklyn’s queer nightlife, specifically in the neighborhood of Bushwick. We then situate our work within Internet studies research on online communities, focusing on studies of communities of alterity, and address key conceptual framings for this paper – faceted identities and relational labor. In the following section, we explain our methodological approach and then proceed to our analytical findings, leading into a discussion that reframes identity work in terms of online interfaces and the fluidity of identity, and connecting to HCI literature on ethics of design that embrace complexity and seams. We conclude with a consideration of alternate conceptualizations of authenticating online identities and an agenda for design policy in social media platforms.

Background: Brooklyn’s drag community

Drag typically refers to the practice of queer¹ men dressing up in hyper-feminized costumes and then lip-synching songs by female vocalists, often accompanied by dancing and comedy. Beyond its scope as a performance genre, drag is a distinctly queer practice² of calling attention to, exploiting, and producing pleasure from what typically provokes discomfort, prejudice, and even revulsion: the movement between distinct genders (see Rubin, 2002). Scholarly attention to drag spans historical inquiry into precedents of on-stage cross-dressing (e.g. Shevelow, 2006), implications for queer theory (e.g. Butler, 1999; Rubin, 2002) and performance studies (e.g. Moreman & McIntosh, 2010). Research on drag in terms of social media use (or even technological practices more broadly) is far more limited. Our investigation offers analysis of online identity management among a group of performers whose experiences open up inquiry into questions of how social media technologies both help and hinder the production of queer culture, as well as mediating relationships between performers and their audiences.

We locate our study in Brooklyn, and more narrowly the neighborhoods of North and South Bushwick, conventionally referred to simply as Bushwick. Bushwick is home to over 125,000 people, where approximately 40% of residents are foreign born, dominated by Latinos, primarily of Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Dominican descent (U.S. Census, 2010). A combination of factors has facilitated a recent development of young, urban nightlife: relatively affordable housing, reliable public transit, and

proximity to the neighboring Williamsburg's booming urban nightlife. The rapid growth of Brooklyn's drag scene is one manifestation of this transformation, where participants described a shift from just a few regularly performing drag queens a few years ago to approximately 80 active drag queens now (Bushwig, 2014). Based both on participant comments and on our own experiences attending drag shows, Brooklyn's drag performers are racially and economically diverse; trans and genderqueer folks participate regularly in the community, which prides itself on being welcoming to gender nonconforming performers³. At the same time, the scene's performers are mostly queer men who perform some kind of feminized identity on stage; we encountered very few drag kings (female-bodied performers who project a hyper-masculine persona on stage) during our research. Thus, we note that Bushwick's drag community⁴ is more demonstrative of some forms of diversity than others.

Prior work

To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate the social media practices of drag performers. Nevertheless, our work is very much in conversation with research from Internet studies and online communication, particularly two subfields of work: first, a growing body of research that addresses alterity (and specifically queerness) online, and second, relationships between performers and fans. As we noted in the introduction, the experiences of drag queens point to two spheres of complexity – the first around sexuality and gender, the second around personal versus professional identity. Our review of related work situates the investigation of Brooklyn's drag community and social media use as related both to technological alterity and work/life balance. Our investigation builds on this interdisciplinary work, focusing on how social media platforms are conceived (by designers) and reworked (by users) in the context of both alterity and professional life.

Internet studies research and (queer) alterity. Communities of alterity have benefited in particular from online technologies as a means of locating others with similar interests and experiences. For example, Thoreau (2006) analyzed articles in the online magazine *Ouch!*, produced for and by people with disabilities, which provided an important venue for constructing a counter narrative to mainstream depictions of disabilities, a theme that surfaces in accounts from our participants, who welcomed increasing awareness of drag as a means of countering stereotypical associations between cross-dressing, deviance, and addiction. Other studies of online alterity, such as Hodgkinson's (2002) work on goth subculture, Lingel and boyd's (2013) examination of practices of secrecy among the extreme body modification community, and Lingel, Trammell, Sanchez, and Naaman's (2012) work on information flows in an underground music scene, have demonstrated how subcultures and marginalized groups repurpose dominant technologies in ways that better reflect localized values and norms. Literature from Science and Technology Studies (STS) has also examined the reappropriation of technologies and technical practices from their intended (and heteronormative) uses, as in Eglash's (2007) work on Native American frameworks for technological design, and Eglash and Bleecker's (2001) research on the ways that Black people's appropriations of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been subverted and reworked by Black practices and needs. We build on this work by bridging a communication analysis of how online platforms both foster and hinder identity work and interpersonal connections with an STS interest in adapting and improvising mainstream technologies. Our investigation of social media and drag brings a concentration on ideologies of design to queer identities and practices, which are sometimes in tension with dominant design paradigms that emphasize simplicity and uni-dimensionality.

In terms of scholarly attention to specifically queer groups online, much of the work has focused on the role of ICTs in understanding queer identity, as well as finding mechanisms of social support. Downing (2013) used qualitative interviews with nonheterosexual youth workers to understand the use

of social media designed specifically for queer users, using the lenses of embodiment and performativity. Taking a human information behavior approach, Hamer (2003) used the construct of information poverty (Chatman, 1996) to understand how ICTs facilitate the coming out process for young gay men. More than 10 years later, participants in our study voiced a sense of obligation to document their lives online precisely because it offered the possibility of providing information about queer life to others who maybe questioning their sexuality. In the context of theorizing the role of online platforms in empowering queer youth, Berliner (2013) and Gray (2009) have each offered powerful critiques of the notion that access to ICTs is universal or linear in its distribution of power, arguing that popular rhetoric of online media as empowering is rooted in a series of assumptions about technological literacy and political values that may not resonate with the everyday lives of queer folk. Rather than focusing on how ICTs accommodate the need for information or social support, our investigation of queerness and online practice concentrates on the extent to which dominant social media platforms accommodate the needs of drag queens, both in terms of performing queer identity online and in their lives as performers. It is to this second set of sociotechnical tensions that we now turn.

Internet studies research and performing for audiences. As Litt (2012) has pointed out, general social media use can be constructed as a dynamic between performer and audience, but this relationship is experienced quite literally by entertainers and fans online. Focusing specifically on Twitter, Marwick and boyd (2012) examined how celebrity practitioners manage relationships with their online followers, revealing seemingly personal information in order to craft a sense of intimacy, and conversing with other celebrities as a display of status. In her work on relationships between musicians and their fans, Baym (2012; 2014; 2015) noted a series of dialectical tensions that emerge in the context of online social connections; based on this work, Baym has developed the construct of relational labor, which we address more fully in the next section. Geared towards a practitioner⁵ audience, Kirsner (2009) described strategies for artists, musicians, and other creative workers to build an online fan base by leveraging social media. Across these texts, what emerges is the extensive amount of work required to build and maintain an online following, where practices of online communication are often deliberate and highly crafted, even as the content itself may seem improvised and haphazard. As a related point, these projects demonstrate the extent to which online interactions between performers and their online networks are deeply reliant on the nuanced control of self-presentation, the ability to leverage a highly curated portrayal of identity.

Theoretical concepts. Our investigation of sociotechnical practice addresses social media use both in terms of identity and interpersonal communication. We rely on a constructionist conceptualization of identity, where people make sense of themselves and others by following (or not following) social norms and scripts (Goffman, 1959). Following Farnham and Churchill (2011), we contend that “people maintain social boundaries and show different facets of their character according to the demands of the current social situation” (p.359). In other words, identity is complex and flexible rather than unified and static, and throughout the course of a given day, a person might be called on to draw on and represent different facets of her identity depending on context, such that different behaviors, vocabularies, attire, and technological practices are continually reworked as social context changes. For participants in this study, we were interested in understanding the extent to which different online platforms accommodate the faceted lives of drag performers as they navigate different contexts of day job and nightlife; online and offline; masculine and feminine. In the context of faceted identity work, the experiences of drag queens are useful to study not because they are unique but rather because they offer a more dramatic case of managing different facets of identity across a range of sociotechnical contexts, a phenomenon deeply familiar to many of us whose everyday lives are increasingly and heterogeneously embedded in online technologies.

The extent to which social relationships increasingly develop and are maintained online may be experienced generally by social media users, but it is acutely experienced by artists, musicians and performers, who rely on these connections and interactions to make a living. In her research on the interpersonal connections between musicians and fans, Baym (2015) uses the term relational labor to discuss these changing dynamics, where relational labor

requires a willingness and ability to present and sell yourself as something of value rather than brazenly self-promoting. This responsibility for being pleasing, reaching out, connecting with others, and providing a space for audience members to connect with another, falls on the musicians. (p.19)

Relational labor describes the processes of managing social ties that demand continuous, intimate interactions, often in ways that provoke users to reconsider the affordances of social media platforms themselves. Conceptualizing fans as online friends, releasing personal information and media to illustrate interpersonal intimacy, identifying as more than a musician (e.g. a parent or as someone living with a medical condition) are all examples of how relational labor manifests online. We use the concept of relational labor to discuss the online practices of drag performers as they manage audiences and navigate a range of platforms, using policies and social norms that vary in their accommodation of fluid, complex identities. Using relational labor as a frame allows us to make use of two understandings of performance as it relates to drag. First, as a queer practice of performing gender and sexuality (which has been addressed at length in queer and gender studies theory (e.g. Butler, 1999; Rubin, 2002)) and second as a kind of labor, familiar to many kinds of artists and creative workers who leverage online tools to facilitate their careers. Our investigation examines social media use among a group of users who are deeply invested in deploying online tools in the service of both kinds of performance: performing gender and sexuality, and performing-as-professional. Understanding the extent to which online platforms accommodate or complicate these distinct kinds of performance is the central objective of our analysis.

Methods

As Manning (2013) has argued, meaning-making is a process of social interaction, where “a research focus should be placed on how people interact to make meaning” (Manning, p.2508). Because we were interested in a collective meaning-making of the socio technological dimensions of drag, specifically social media, we felt that focus groups were a particularly appropriate methodological tool. In social science research, focus groups are often deployed as a means of gathering a range of viewpoints on a single topic, where the dialectic that emerges from group conversation can yield rich and complex understandings of a phenomenon, even as counter viewpoints are also raised (Lundt & Livingstone, 1996). Between September and December of 2013, we conducted four focus groups ranging in size from two to five participants, with a total of 15 participants. Although the number of participants is small, given that we estimate Brooklyn’s drag scene to have approximately 80 active performers, our focus group populations represents a sizable percentage of the community. We recruited participants through word-of-mouth and snowball sampling; most participants knew each other, some quite intimately, and others only vaguely or just by reputation. Participants ranged in terms of their experience as performers, where some had been instrumental in creating Brooklyn’s drag community and others had begun performing online in the last few months. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 35, and all lived in Brooklyn. Wanting to respect the fluidity of gender and sexuality prevalent in the drag community, we did not ask participants to list their sexuality, gender or sex as part of our recruitment process; in the course of our conversations, several participants identified themselves as trans, which supports a narrative we encountered during fieldwork that Brooklyn’s drag community sought to be inclusive and welcoming of trans performers. Focus group questions centered on the role of social media as

performers, and as a tool of forming community. We also asked about the extent to which these practices had changed over time for performers who had participated in the scene for a number of years. Given our interest in social media technologies, we asked all focus group participants to list the range of social network sites that they used in the context of drag performances, which we list in table 1. Some of the liveliest conversations in fact unfolded in the smaller focus groups, where participants tended to build off each other's comments in a back-and-forth dynamic. Similarities began to emerge after the first two focus groups, and by the fourth we felt that we had hit saturation as far as our interests in typical uses (and tensions) of social media practices.

In addition to focus groups, we took advantage of a 3-day salon called Drag Arts (held in New York's Lower East Side in November, 2013) to hold a workshop on the role of social media in Brooklyn's drag community. The workshop drew approximately 40 people, including drag performers (from Brooklyn as well as Manhattan) and nightlife goers. The workshop was structured as a moderated discussion of themes that had emerged thus far from focus groups, including the role of social media in promotion, documentation, and communication between performers and fans. We also addressed terminology around collective identity, working through collective understandings of terms like community, subculture, and counterculture. Thus the workshop both supplemented our data and acted as a form of member checking (Cresswell, 2007, p.217) in that we were able to present some of the high-level themes from our interviews to a larger part of the community and solicit feedback. Focus groups and the workshop were recorded, transcribed, and coded in NVIVO. We used an open coding method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p.195) to develop a list of themes, using a constant comparative method to make thematic connections across transcripts. After our initial analysis of transcripts, we further developed high-level themes, called thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006), around the use of technology in the context of drag life, including motivations for using social media in their lives as performers; different layers of community that emerge or are shaped by everyday use of online technologies; and differences between desired and prescribed uses of online platforms. Our results section is largely structured around these themes.

Results

Online communication forms a vital part of drag performers' lives, both in terms of building a fan base and developing a Brooklyn-based drag community. Facebook and Instagram enjoyed ubiquitous use among participants, where Facebook was considered a vital means of maintaining social ties (both for drag specifically and more generally). Instagram was valued in particular for its visual emphasis, deemed particularly important for documenting different instantiations of performers being "in face," a term that typically refers to a queen being ready to take the stage, and includes being in make-up as well as a wig and costume. Although we refer to a number of platforms in our analysis, we concentrate largely on Facebook, partly because it was such a dominant form of interpersonal communication referenced in focus groups, and partly because it presented the most tension in perceptions of censorship and perceived straightness. Although these tensions are important for understanding the sociotechnical relationships between alterity and dominant social media platforms, it's important to acknowledge that platforms like Facebook were also highly valued by participants. Like many technologies, Facebook simultaneously brings both pleasures and frustrations in everyday use. Before analyzing the latter, we offer a brief overview of the key functions of social media for drag performers we interviewed: promoting oneself as performer and documenting drag life, which can be broken down further into documenting performances for personal use versus contributing to a sense of community. We describe these functions briefly below, and in table 2.

Table 1 Participants’ self-reported participation on social media platforms. We asked participants to list the social media sites they used rather than providing a check-list, meaning that participation is likely underreported for some of the less common sites (e.g. it’s likely that more participants have YouTube and LinkedIn accounts, but simply didn’t think to list them without prompting). As well, some sites listed may not meet standard definitions of what constitutes a social network site (see Ellison & boyd, 2013). Our intent was not to gather a statistically accurate data set of online participation, but rather to get a sense of which social media sites were considered most important to everyday life as a drag performer.

Participants social media use	
Platform	# of Participants (out of 15)
Facebook	15
Instagram	15
Twitter	7
Tumblr	5
Scruff	2
Pinterest	1
Vimeo	1
Grindr	1
YouTube	1
LinkedIn	1
FetLife	1
Vine	1
Yelp	1

A key objective of SNS activity for drag performers is to promote upcoming shows, or using online interactions to generate in-person attendance at performances. Participants described a number of tactics for building and maintaining an online following, which ranged from the kind of tone to adopt (flirtatious, salacious) to the time of day to post (right as people were getting off work, because this is when they tend to finalize plans for the evening). Social media also offered an important means of documenting performances, which can be further broken down in two categories of utility: documenting an individual trajectory of performance, and documenting participation within a community. Regarding the former,

Table 2 This table describes key uses of social media for drag performers, as described by participants. Many of these objectives apply beyond drag specifically, and likely resonate with performers who leverage social networking sites to connect with fans, as well as people who use social media platforms to participate in different types of communities.

Objectives of social media use in drag life	
Objective	Participant descriptions
Self-promotion	FG4: It sounds silly, but it's the whole thing, if you don't [self-promote on Facebook], you don't have a career. You can be amazingly talented ... but because there's so many of us [and] because so many people want a piece of the pie, you just have to put yourself out there that much more, and be able to tap into all these possibilities using social media as marketing
Documenting individual performances	FG4: Everyone has a journey in their drag. Everyone looks very different when they start to where when they are now. [It's useful,] looking back at old pictures and studying them and looking at things [like] that, because your makeup constantly changes. You have to try new things and then you'll go back and look at things you liked. I've done that a lot where I've looked back and see what's changed. Either I want to [keep it] or I'm like, "Good thing that changed."
Developing a local queer social network	FG4: Yeah, so [Facebook] helped me find that gay community that's out here, but along the road I fell into this group that slowly became a family, and a ... community.
Contributing to a larger queer community	FG2: I know there are queerish things and gender bending is becoming more popular in the society and public culture, but it's still a good way to let people know that the stigma is not true, drag queens are not just people who get wasted in bars.

drag queens are typically expected to reinvent themselves constantly (meaning new makeup, hairstyles, costumes, and routines), all of which take a great deal of creativity and effort; many participants described needing 2-3 hours to get "in face." Participants valued the ways that social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and YouTube enabled them to access the trajectories of drag identity (both their own and others') over a given period of time. These trajectories were useful in terms of evaluating one's own work, as well as getting ideas for new performances. Participants also described social media as vital to the process of developing a specifically queer community, in keeping with scholars who have noted that online technologies have offered a form of connectivity that is particularly of value to historically disenfranchised and marginalized communities (Bumgarner, 2013; Campbell, 2004; Gray, 2009; Shaw, 1997). Most of the people we interviewed were not originally from New York City, and many had moved to the city after or in order to attend college, or to pursue a career in entertainment or art. For these people in particular, social media was described as essential for making and maintaining connections within New York's queer community. Several participants voiced a sense of obligation to a larger queer and questioning community, where documentation of their lives could provide useful information to those trying to understand their own or others' queer identities. This sense of

commitment to archiving drag was directed both outwards, to address negative stereotypes of drag queens, and inwards, at queer and questioning youth.

It's important to note that these functions of social media are by no means singularly useful to drag queens. Many kinds of performers (and indeed, professionals in general) use platforms like Facebook to build and maintain relationships with fans or clients. Similarly, documenting everyday life is a core function of social media for many users (professionally or otherwise), as is connecting to local and identity-based communities. Although these uses of social media are useful and even enjoyable in general, there are specific practices that we encountered among drag performers that open up inquiry into the ability of platforms to accommodate performance of queer identity as well as the performance of relational labor. We turn to these issues next.

"In face" on Facebook: The relational labor of multiple accounts.

One of the drivers for our investigation of online communication practices in Brooklyn's drag community stemmed from wanting to understand the practice of maintaining separate accounts for performer versus everyday life. Research on users with multiple accounts on a single platform (or even user practices across many platforms) is fairly limited (for exceptions, see Gross, 2009; Singer et al., 2014; Stutzman&Hartzog, 2012), and Brooklyn's drag community offered a means of analyzing precisely these tensions, which became particularly salient in the wake of Facebook's confrontation with drag queens in October of 2014. Initially, we'd expected that motivations for maintaining separate pages would be largely motivated by wanting to keep drag life private; even for participants who might be out to their family as gay men, being out as drag performers can carry added stigma. We did hear this concern from some performers⁶, but the more commonly voiced motivation was about maintaining boundaries between fans and friends because doing so facilitated relational labor. For purposes of clarity, we are referring to people who maintain separate Facebook accounts, rather than a personal page and a fan page. The topic of having two (or more) separate user accounts versus a fan page surfaced in every focus group, and there was unanimous agreement that the latter offered inadequate means of interacting with fans. For example, one participant recounted the decision to switch from having a fan page to a separate account: "I think when I first started, I made a fan page...Then two days later I was like, 'Oh, this is stupid, it's not going to work, because I can't interact enough with them.' It was like a one-way page. People could like things, [but] I was like, 'I need to talk to them as a friend.'" Across focus groups, fan pages were dismissed as inadequate for practices of nuanced interpersonal communication; In focus group four, participants critiqued fan pages for their inability to replicate on-stage personalities in online contexts: "With a page, you can kind of do that, you can create awareness, but you need that interaction. We're personalities at a bar. We come up and talk to you. We make sure you have a good time. We need to create that online as well." In referring to a need to treat their fans like friends, to interact online as if they're at a bar, participants offered the clearest articulation of relational labor, where participants described needing the functionality of a profile (rather than a fan page) to perform their drag personas online. Moreover, drag performers conceptualized relational labor as a replication of being at a bar or club: circulating, socializing, and ensuring that people are having a fun and memorable experience. Whereas fan pages are intended to serve "business[es],band[s,and]product[s]," (Burcher,2007), part of the work of being a drag queen requires interaction that does not appear to be self-branding. Relational labor brings into relief the inadequacy of Facebook pages for drag performers, a gap between imagined uses of a Facebook feature and the functionality of interpersonal interaction and relationship maintenance desired by this particular type of professional work.

Although maintaining separate pages was common among participants (just over half), it was by no means a sweeping majority. Many of those who maintained just one page expressed a very real resistance to the idea of dividing oneself⁷ into day and night, boy and queen, performer and

professional. For example, when we asked participants about their first experiences doing drag, one participant from focus group two responded:

I started doing drag in 1989 when I was born. I actually don't know if I can put a time, or even a place on when I started doing drag because it sort of just emerged out of my personal presentation. Everyone asks me [about my Facebook name], "Oh, is that your drag persona?" I'm like, "No, I don't have a drag persona." I am my drag persona, I guess."

Even in cases where participants opted not to maintain separate pages for their drag personas, relational labor was still apparent, in that participants were willing to invest significant labor in order to promote and document their on-stage lives. This was evident in conversations about tactics for interacting with online audiences to bring them into shows, as in the trial and error approaches around when, precisely, to post updates about upcoming performances:

There's a window between five and seven when people are getting off of work and coming off the train and they're all checking their phone. If they get a notification, they'll be more likely to click they're going than if you do it at nine in the morning when they could be either asleep or at work. It's all strategy.

Interestingly, this participant was describing advice from another participant – in a different focus group. Several times, in fact, participants described practices of relational labor as tips gleaned from other performers in the Brooklyn drag community, indicating the extent to which practices are circulated in a collective exchange of how best to utilize online platforms in the service of drag life.

Some of these tactics (such as decisions of when or how often to post) involved no conflict with platform politics, while others (such as maintaining separate accounts) absolutely did. "Facebook is anti-drag": Platform politics and drag identity. Participants noted specific tensions with Facebook as a platform for drag performers, stemming predominantly from Facebook's "real name" policy. This policy (which Facebook promised in October 2014 to revise, as noted in the introduction), rooted in its origins among elite universities where site access required a school e-mail account, was perceived as contradictory to a fundamental component of drag practice, namely the fluidity and complexity of identity, gender and sexuality. We quote one participant from focus group three at length as demonstrative not only of these tensions, but also the work arounds that circulate within the community forgetting past terms of service obstacles:

Facebook is anti-drag. It was made by the guys at Harvard who were meaning for college kids to hookup with each other. You didn't know how Facebook developed? You haven't seen The Social Network? When they opened [Facebook] up to the general public, it assumed that everyone has a first name and a last name ... I remember having to hack Facebook into letting me have one name. There was some tutorial where I had to trick my computer into thinking I was in Indonesia where they have one name. Then I had to change my language to Indonesian on Facebook. I have all the buttons memorized by the little Indonesian words. [Another queen] told me something changed and she was like "the Facebook found me out." I was like, "Oh shit." I'm just a ticking time bomb waiting for them to demand a photocopy of my driver's license, which is the sixteen year old Christian kid from Alabama with braces and everything.

This quote articulates the stakes of Facebook's identity politics, and the ways in which the site refuses to accommodate certain kinds of sociocultural complexities. Presented with a platform insistence on a

First and last name, this participant (as well as several others we encountered in fieldwork) was willing to put up with considerable inconvenience, namely an interface in a language he couldn't read, as an

acceptable tradeoff for a username that matched his stage name. Although the real name policy provokes the most resentment among participants, as a whole Facebook was characterized as corporate, straight and somewhat inflexible, even in design decisions that were less directly in opposition to drag identity. For example, Facebook's introduction of the timeline (a feature that launched in 2011 and 2012, providing a stream of photos and updates – see Facebook, n.d.) required retroactive management of media, as discussed by participants in focus group one:

Facebook changed and now they have photos from when you were born... I manage all my photos, like all these photos that [showed up] when the new Facebook changed, now no one can see my old photos.

Remember when [another queen] posted a photo on Facebook, like from when I did drag four years ago? [laughter] Of course my makeup wasn't fierce, and people were like, "Oh my God!" and I was like, "Bitch, you better take that off."

Facebook's design decisions affect its entire user population, and many people besides drag queens felt inconvenienced or unnerved by the timeline as a platform intervention (Hamburger, 2012). Yet for drag queens (and other kinds of performers) who carefully manage their online media presence as part of the relational labor of maintaining relationships with fans, the sudden emergence of uncurated photos into a highly curated stream of media was described as particularly disruptive. Participants in fact linked this technical shift as being akin to a prank from a rival drag queen posting evidence of an early attempt at drag, at odds with more current and sophisticated skills of being in face. As Grasmuck, Martin and Zhao (2008) noted in their article on ethno-racial identity on Facebook, "the interface of Facebook makes some choices for users unavoidable while others are unavailable" (p. 164). In response to Facebook's "anti-drag" interface with its alternately unavoidable and unavailable choices, drag queens we interviewed had developed (and then circulated) various tactics (including maintaining multiple accounts and falsifying location) to cope with and subvert what participants perceived as Facebook's demands for simplicity, one-dimensionality, and straightness. As we noted earlier, some of these tactics are in line with Facebook's policies (such as maintaining strict control over how photos are tagged) and others are clear violations (such as maintaining separate accounts).

Our analysis of sociotechnical practices among Brooklyn drag performers reveals an array of uses and obstacles of social media platforms in everyday life. On the one hand, platforms like Facebook and Instagram are vital tools of self-promotion and documentation, benefiting individual performers and the Brooklyn drag community as a whole. At the same time, participants pointed to drawbacks in social media use, mounting a critique of policies that require a relationship to identity (as singular and verifiable through official documentation) that did not reflect their everyday lives and community values. Some participants expressed preferences for platforms they viewed as particularly accommodating of marginalized identities, such as Tumblr,⁸ where others saw Facebook as occasionally inconvenient, but on the whole, vital as a means of building a fan following. In the remainder of this paper, we take an HCI approach to analyzing the design of social media platforms in terms of identity, queerness, and seams. By returning to and unpacking how participants described their community's relationship to technology, our aim is to draw together theories of online identity and communication (namely faceted identity and relational labor) with ethics of technological design. Our discussion is intended to offer a theoretical framework for analyzing the design of online systems as well as specific design implications that can accommodate complex, faceted and fluid identities, in ways that reflect but extend far beyond the needs of drag performers.

Discussion: The queer design of failure?

An early promise of online technology was the ability to shift fluidly from one identity to another, freed from offline constraints like physical features and immediate social ties (Turkle, 1995). These assumptions were quickly critiqued (e.g. Bruckman, 1996; Nakamura, 1995; See also Burrell, 2012), but it's worth returning to the promise of fluidity through the lens of Brooklyn's drag community. As social media users, drag performers (as well as many others⁹) require fluidity as they shift between facets that draw from markedly different social contexts. We contend that this fluidity is only more obvious rather than entirely distinct from a more general experience of online identity work, a difference in degree rather than kind. When participants describe Facebook as "anti-drag," it's important to note that as a platform, it meets many of the needs of drag performers, yet stops short at the fundamental point of accepting multiple identities. This limitation is important in an obvious way for drag queens who benefit personally and professionally from maintaining separate accounts, but on a more conceptual level, the insistence on a single identity does a disservice to a much larger group of users who would prefer to perform a range of facets, personae, and identities as part of their everyday social media use. The reluctance or inability to design for fluidity and complexity marks a conceptual limitation in how people negotiate identity online. Communication scholars have theorized identity as curated within the confines of online profiles (Hogan, 2010; Liu, 2007), but this curation is necessarily shaped by platform design choices. Our qualitative analysis of social media use among drag queens demonstrates the intricacy of identity work, both in performing complex facets of gender and managing complex social ties as part of being a performer. The complexities bound up in these different forms of performance sometimes exceeded the bounds of Facebook's design norms, alternately resulting in frustration, fatigue, and improvisation.

In describing social media practices related to their lives as drag queens, participants discussed a broader set of technological relations that privileged complexity over uni-dimensionality, analog over digital, and mess over simplicity. For example, the following conversation unfolded during our third focus group:

In a lot of ways in Brooklyn, technology doesn't really jive with drag. We run into a lot of technical difficulties with our performances. That's kind of the charm of it, too.

I think it's been incorporated into the aesthetic. [laughter]

It has. It brings to light the technology versus organism dialogue going on in the 21st century. I just see drag and the art of this performance in Brooklyn as this really organic organism breathing thing. You were saying [another performer] had [advocated for drag queens] using their Facebook as businesses. There's also drunk status updates and horrible grammar mistakes all over the place. Technology can't deal. It doesn't really know how to deal with something as organic as the drag scene. That translates into the audio mixers breaking, DJ booths fucking up, the lighting is shit.

These comments on the imperfections of technology link to a key thread of human computer interaction literature that asks how technology should be designed for use in everyday life. In a 1996 keynote that would prove deeply influential among designers and HCI scholars, Weiser advocated for an ethic of "seamful technology," deliberately countering the technological ideal of seamlessly smoothing over human messiness and obscuring its own presence. According to Weiser, a common technical design aesthetic glosses over its own work and the components underlying it. In contrast, "what's hard is letting everything be itself, with other things. The goal is seamful systems, with beautiful seams."

Returning to the concept of faceted identity, seamfulness lends itself to thinking about designing technologies that can accommodate the many facets of users' lives, both personal and professional.

We argue that drag itself can be read as seamful, both in the literal sense of stitching together a series of costumes (and wigs and choreographies) and in the more conceptual sense of crafting drag identity for the stage. Queerness more broadly embraces seams, in that telling stories about seams - of gender, sexuality and desires-is a particularly powerful means of queer folk drawing together as a community. When drag performers talk about their community as one that embraces aesthetics of technological failures, they articulate a relationship to technology that takes pleasure in seamfulness. When a drag queen hacks Facebook to set her location as Indonesia so that she can use her performer name as her "real" identity, when she delights and takes pride in faulty sound systems and falling apart stages, when she says "I think of Facebook as a way to tell jokes and fuck with people and to have a fabulous documentation of all the outfits I put together," this taps into a radical paradigm of technology as provocative and seamful, of embracing oneself as an assemblage of technologies and desires and bodies, of participating in a community that revels in forms of play that are not just about sexual and gender play but about technological play, about queering technologies as much as queering themselves. Weiser intended seamfulness as a design ethic that promotes the visible assemblage of technologies and functions, a paradigm that encourages the legibility of converging platforms and tools. By looking at the experiences of drag queens - and specifically their frustrations, tricks and workarounds - in using social media technologies, seamfulness offers a design ethic that isn't just about converging technologies, but also the multiple personnas that constitute faceted life. The goal of a seamful system in the specific context of social media should be the accommodation of multiple and diverse identities, both in terms of identities that are in some way marginalized, and also in terms of accounting for different facets of everyday life - personal and professional, individual and community, immediate and extended networks. Relational labor names a set of tasks that performers undertake in order to connect with fans and maintain those connections overtime, work that often transverses a broad range of tactics and networks. Seamfulness offers a design ethic that can account for these complexities of identity work and interpersonal communication. It is our hope that by drawing together communication theory and HCI design frameworks, we can offer a more robust engagement with the needs of users and the norms of dominant platforms.

Having outlined this convergence of identity work, relational labor and technological seamfulness, what alternative mechanisms of authentication could be designed that are more in keeping with a queer design of seams and fluidity? In their October, 2014 apology, Facebook announced its intention to allow profiles with names used in everyday life¹⁰, specifically affirming a drag performer's stage name as acceptable. Although this new policy addresses some of the concerns highlighted by participants in this study, it does little to address the practice of maintaining separate profiles. More than a design flaw, Facebook's insistence on single profiles reflects an investment (figuratively and literally) in conceptualizing identity as unitary and unified. The tensions exposed by dragqueens' uses of Facebook are less of a call for accommodating countercultural groups per se, and more about the ways that Facebook's policies can be limiting for a wide array of users looking to perform different identity facets on the same platform. In terms of alternate approaches to Facebook's policies and functionality around identity, one possibility would be to increase the functionality of fan pages, providing tools for relational labor. Focus group conversations were unanimous in dismissing fanpages for the performer needs, noting that pages don't allow for the interactions and affective communications required in relational labor. Focus group participants felt that fan pages didn't allow for sufficient interaction with fans, and were inadequate for replicating the promotional work of being out at a club, circulating with both current and potential fans. If Facebook continues to insist on single accounts, the design of fan pages should be developed to sustain more nuanced and longitudinal interactions between performers and

fans. Returning to the key functions we identified of social media for drag performers (self-promotion and documentation), we can use these community-identified functions as a clear set of guidelines for features that fan pages would need to offer to support relational labor.

A second (and more seamful) approach would be to allow users to have multiple profiles that are linked at the level of metadata. In such a system, an individual person could have multiple accounts (reflecting the different facets of their lives and personalities), linking these profiles in a way that is visible to Facebook but not necessarily to other users. These links would enable Facebook to track a user's activity and data across multiple profiles while also providing more flexibility for users who would prefer to keep separate profiles. This approach would also make visible the seamful identity work of faceted, everyday life, in that individual users would be able to craft social media accounts (within the same platform) around particular facets of their lives, with the choice to make those links visible or not to their social networks. The fact that these approaches are more complex, exposing more sociotechnical seams, should not be considered as an obstacle of functionality to be overcome, but rather as an opportunity to reflect a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the complexities of identity work, the beauty of seams.

We conclude by acknowledging that it's reasonable to ask why Facebook, or indeed any social media platform, should feel itself required to accommodate the needs of a particular (and admittedly not that sizeable) group of users, many of whom knowingly disregard and evade rules around naming and identity. No platform can be all things to all users, and given that Facebook is only one of many social network sites, users whose needs are not being met could simply turn to other platforms. The concept of relational labor reminds us why the suggestion of simply switching sites falls flat, particularly for performers, drag queens or otherwise. Relational labor refers not just to momentary decisions and immediate responses to social cues, but to a long-term trajectory of developing and maintaining relationships over time. Informing performers that they can simply stop using a site that doesn't reflect their values elides the ways in which participants feel entitled to a site where they've not only archived their content but also logged countless hours of work maintaining social ties as part of their lives as performers. To an extent this work cannot be reproduced elsewhere, as long as one site continues to dominate as the social media platform of preference, convening the biggest audience and most dedicated group of users. Similar to demands that Google is beholden to its users to make its algorithmic logic more transparent precisely because it dominates web queries (Pariser, 2011), Facebook has obligations to meet the needs of a diverse array of users because it dominates as a social media platform, commanding not only a huge number of users but also an incredible amount of work in terms of time spent posting and communicating online. As of this writing (January 2015), Facebook has apologized for and committed to changing its policies on identities, yet reports of drag performers having their accounts closed have continued (Holpuch, 2014). A disconcerting risk of this confrontation is that Facebook will set an example of a social media platform responding to the concerns of a historically disenfranchised group by issuing an apology rather than exploring possibilities for substantive design changes, an opportunity to introduce a more nuanced, less prescribed, and messier arrangement of functionality and design.

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Notes

1 Throughout this paper, we use the term queer to refer to non heteronormative sexuality. An undeniably loaded term, we follow Halperin (2003) in valuing the breadth of identities encapsulated in the term “queer” as opposed to narrower (although more precise) terms like “gay” or “homosexual.”

2 It is outside the scope of this paper to offer an extensive history of drag as a performance genre, beyond noting an increasing (although by no means ubiquitous) awareness of drag in mainstream culture, facilitated by shows like RuPaul’s Drag Race (for a scholarly treatment of race and sexuality on Drag Race, see Edgar, 2011) and the recent victory of a transgendered contestant in the Eurovision talent contest (Lucas, 2014).

3 Many of these descriptors were set up in direct contrast to Manhattan’s drag scene (characterized as more commercial and conventional, less tolerant of genderqueer and trans performers and less rooted in fostering a sense of community), and in fact, every focus group addressed the issue of a rivalry between Manhattan and Brooklyn drag, although this split was alternately characterized as friendly, silly, and manufactured, or significant, real, and deleterious.

4 We use the word “community” throughout our analysis, even as we recognize that this term is a fraught one, typically associated with romanticized, utopian or idealized separation from mainstream values, norms, and economics (Joseph, 2002). Most participants felt that the word community resonated most closely with their values and experiences of Brooklyn drag, preferring it in particular to terms like “subculture” or “counterculture.” We should also note that the term community takes on a particular valence in the context of queerness, where it resonates with words like “family” and “sisterhood,” invoking a specific set of ideas around shared subjectivity, as well as a set of political objectives (see Joseph, 2009; Weston, 1991).

5 In contrast to analyzing the experiences of how performers utilize social media to connect with fans, researchers have also examined how fans use these platforms to connect with performers. See Lingel and Naaman (2012) and Bennett (2012).

6 Interestingly, references to concerns of outing oneself as a drag performer were as often tied to dynamics of family as they were to dating, meaning that references to concerns of outing arose in equal measure around having one’s grandmother find a drag profile on Facebook as having a potential romantic partner find a drag profile on Grindr. Also related to the issue of outing, we note that all participants were out as queer (as opposed to being out as a drag queen) to their immediate family and friends; participants varied in the extent to which they referenced being out in their professional (nondrag) lives.

7 We are not suggesting that users who create separate profiles effectively create a split of “real” versus “fake” identities, but rather that all social media profiles are constructed (Liu, 2007), which is only exemplified by but not singular to cases of creating multiple social media accounts.

8 For an analysis of Tumblr as a platform with specifically queer affordances, see Renninger, in press.

9 In interviews with journalists about the 2014 protests, drag performers noted that they were in fact surprised but felt reinforced by the different groups of people whose lives were similarly affected by Facebook’s “authentic” identity rule, including survivors of abuse, police informants, school teachers and others (Seals, 2014).

10 The apology is rather disingenuous in its claim that Facebook’s policy has never been intended to insist on state-issued ID, which is neither how participants in this study conceptualized Facebook’s

identity policy, nor is it reflected in statements like Mark Zuckerberg's comment that using a "fake" name indicated a "lack of integrity" (Zimmer, 2010).

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