

Pre-print version, to cite this work, please reference:

Triggs, A. H., Møller, K., & Neumayer, C. (2019). Context collapse and anonymity among queer Reddit users. *New Media & Society*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819890353>

Context collapse and anonymity among queer Reddit users

Anthony Henry Triggs, Kristian Møller, Christina Neumayer

Abstract

This paper maps out how people in queer communities on Reddit navigate context collapse. Drawing upon data from interviews with queer Reddit users and insights from other studies of context collapse in digital media, we argue that context collapse also occurs in anonymity-based social media. The interviews reveal queer Reddit users' practices of context differentiation, occurring at four levels: somatic, system, inter-platform, and intra-platform. We use these levels to map out how LGBTQ people express their identities and find community on Reddit while seeking to minimize the risks imposed by multiple impending context collapses. Because living an authentic queer life can make subjects vulnerable, we find that despite Reddit's anonymity, sophisticated practices of context differentiation are developed and maintained. We argue that context collapse in an era of big data and social media platforms operates beyond the control of any one user, which causes problems, particularly for queer people.

Introduction

The concept of 'context collapse' has become an adaptable framework for understanding the socio-technical dynamics of online sociability and, more specifically, its types of failures in separating audiences (boyd, 2008; Davis and Jurgenson, 2014; Dennen and Burner, 2017; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Vitak, 2012; Wesch, 2009). With the emergence of social media, internet sociability has gradually shifted away from anonymous platforms and opened up to multiple, expansive identity performances and profile-based interactions. By design, this move limits the possibilities for constructing and maintaining a multitude of online identities. Securing unique identification of a user is not only part of identity performance but also central to the business models of social media corporations (van Dijck, 2013). This is typically achieved by registering civilian information such as name, age, and gender, often accompanied by a profile picture (boyd and Ellison, 2007). Yet, what we call 'anonymity-based sociability' has far from disappeared from the internet, with a prime example being the enormous popularity and cultural significance of the Reddit discussion forum. In

terms of internet traffic and engagement, Reddit is among the world's largest websites¹ and is arguably the most influential anonymity-based social media platform. The Reddit social news site permits use of multiple accounts with varying types and degrees of identification, from which users can contribute links and posts that can be voted up or down by the community. Subreddits are specific topical communities, which can be created by anyone but vary in purpose, size, social norms, and levels of activity (Leavitt, 2015). Despite these possibilities of establishing social relations while using alternate identities, little effort has been made to explicitly explore what the scholarship of context collapse might tell us about anonymity-based social media, with an exception being van der Nagel (2013). Identification of person makes any failure in registering and managing different social media audiences feel inescapable and heightens the social implications of such a failure. Leaving digital traces might lead to more intense repercussions than if the misstep originated from a profile using a pseudonym whose identity is unknown or known to very few, creating the ability to abandon the profile and 'start over'. Nevertheless, anonymity-based social media are by no means risk-free zones, and as with any social interaction, users must navigate different contexts and audiences. Platforms such as Reddit can lend themselves to deeply meaningful and precarious identity expressions, which can occur precisely because of the anonymity they afford.

This article asks how queer Reddit users perceive and manage risks of context collapse *despite* the anonymity afforded by the service. With 1.2 million interest groups (i.e. subreddits, including inactive subreddits) and a plethora of different users, context collapse varies depending on different communities, groups, and user types. LGBTQ and/or kinky Reddit users, whose identities in heteronormative society are not only marginal but also risky, are keenly aware of their multiple contexts and actively engage in context-separating practices. The term 'minority stress' (DiPlacido, 1998) describes the social and psychological toll of inhabiting a stigmatized identity category such as LGBTQ. On the basis of empirical evidence from queer media studies and interviews with LGBTQ-identifying users of a number of subreddits catering to queer people, we examine how LGBTQ people seek to avoid context collapse by way of a range of *differentiation strategies*. We propose categories for various practices and tactics from the perspective of LGBTQ people, but these categories may also translate to and prove useful for other online publics. We identify four

¹ According to the SEO service Alexa, as of June 30, 2019, reddit.com com ranks 15th for global internet traffic and engagement. See <https://www.alexacom/siteinfo/reddit.com>

levels on which context collapse occurs in relation to Reddit and on which context differentiation practices take place: *somatic*, *system*, *inter-platform*, and *intra-platform*. At these levels, we explore how queer Reddit users manage to stay safe, to create and retain the ability to express their identities, and to bypass the often oppressive work of hegemonic contexts. As such, this study expands upon the work of digital health scholars, who map the terrain of threats that queer people navigate online (see, for example, Albury and Byron, 2016) while producing queer social space.

Context collapse and anonymity

Predicting audiences' understandings and reactions and, on a more fundamental level, their social and psychological orientations is inherently marked by uncertainty. In media and communication studies, Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) was the first to address the question of the unknown audience of print news and TV. With the emergence of social media, navigating multiple, fractured, and invisible audiences has become part of everyday life and identity performances in different contexts. Already in 2009, Michael Wesch describes the collapse of contexts in vlogs published on YouTube as an "infinite number of contexts collapsing" (Wesch, 2009: 23). Marwick and boyd (boyd, 2014; boyd and Ellison, 2007; Marwick and boyd, 2014) use 'context collapse' to grapple with issues of privacy on online platforms (primarily corporate social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube), addressing context collapse as a communicative problem accelerated by social media platforms. Social media facilitate the coexistence of multiple publics on one platform. Their uniquely opaque structures make it difficult for the individual user to separate and distinguish between different audiences, while everyday tools for audience targeting are becoming increasingly widespread and sophisticated. Compared to media technologies that facilitate one-to-one or face-to-face interaction, social media platforms in practice offer less control over intended audiences, and contexts (e.g. work, family) collapse on one platform.

Social media platforms such as Facebook reinforce the use of real names and profiles, which render individuals identifiable and traceable. The dominance of identity-based social media intensifies the need to control the crisscrossing of communicative flows and pushes users to "develop innovative mechanisms for achieving privacy in response to the technical architectures and social dynamics" (Marwick and boyd, 2014: 2). Davis and Jurgenson (2014) distinguish between intentional "context collusions" and unintentional "context collisions," highlighting the complex entanglement of social media platform affordances and user practices. Developing a similar argument, Helen Nissenbaum

(2009) contends that privacy is a fulfilment of “information norms,” emphasizing how the expectations of what will be disclosed to whom is context dependent. While context collisions can be used strategically to distribute news across a larger and more diverse audience (Beam et al., 2018), context collisions are unintentional and can have problematic consequences for the individual.

While context collapse has mostly been applied to the study of identity-based networks, the ability to control information flows is also crucial in the identification-agnostic infrastructures of Reddit. Like 4chan, Tumblr, and to some extent Twitter, Reddit affords technical anonymity and the ability to remove “all meaningful identifying information about others in the exchange of material” (Christopherson, 2007: 3040) if a user so desires, and users on Reddit tend to be anonymous (van der Nagel, 2013). As Reddit facilitates simple account registration, without the need to provide an e-mail address, users can easily create several logins and ‘swap identities’. This structural flexibility provides fertile ground for expressions of interests and identities that fit uneasily within mainstream culture. The expression of risky ideas and identities is particularly useful for minorities who need to employ the functionality of keeping parts of their online identity separate. While this is a growing concern, little attempt has been made to systematically address precarity at different levels of Reddit use, with the most influential studies either mostly conceptually pointing out the interplay between Reddit anonymity and sexuality (van der Nagel and Frith, 2015), or focusing on the performance of masculinity (Robards, 2018). LGBTQ people must often develop sophisticated tactics for becoming strategically visible, and on identity-based social media they do considerable work to avoid context collapse.

Navigating queer precarity

The ongoing conceptual and experiential erosion of the public/private distinction has given way to localized, contextualized, and uncertain understandings of what it means to live a digitally mediated life. While there are variations depending on location and socio-cultural context and status, queer people may leverage internet spaces as a means of finding their own forms of queer expression while staying safe because of these spaces’ separation from their regular lives. Access to the specific ways of living that count as private can be limited for LGBTQ people (Berlant and Warner, 1998). Their positions and practices as Other can place them outside of what Michael Warner (2002) describes as ‘the Public’. Depending on the specific setting in which queer life takes place,

deliberate attempts are often made to control the separation of social spheres. For some, this separation is unnecessary or at least is not always necessary. While LGBTQ people still struggle in movements against violence and injustice at the margins, a process is occurring in which queer culture is being mainstreamed or 'gaystreamed' (Ng, 2013). The mainstreaming of queer culture builds upon the image of urban and relatively wealthy LGBTQ people in liberal environments and with high social and cultural status. However, this particular stereotypical context can push less-conforming LGBTQ community members further to the margins (Brown, 2012; Ng, 2013), which may result in even more sophisticated context-separation practices.

These tactics and practices of context separation are also part of managing identities on social media. In a study of queer Facebook use, Stephanie Duguay (2016: 891) finds that "To prevent unintentional context collapse, participants frequently reinstated contexts through tailored performances and audience separation." The disclosure of stigma, Duguay argues, takes the form of coming out of the closet for many LGBTQ people, and the ongoing process of revealing sexual orientation leads to further context differentiation, particularly on social media platforms. Due to Reddit's technical anonymity, the platform seems to invite a sense of "safe space" (Workman, 2014) because it allows LGBTQ people to separate, connect, and form group identities while limiting the social and physical risks of harm placed upon queer socialization by heteronormative society. The constraints of living a queer life in heteronormative society are unevenly experienced by LGBTQ people, meaning that their experiences of context collapse vary. Brown (2012: 1069) urges us to think critically and move beyond the idea of "ordinary homosexualities" in "ordinary cities" and to acknowledge "the specific geographies of the social, political, and economic relations that shape gay lives." Alongside heteronormativity, we must critically recognize the notion of 'homonormativity' (Duggan, 2002) in order to understand LGBTQ practices and tactics within the "heterogeneity of everyday social relations" (Brown 2012: 1071).

Studies of queer dating, hook-up platforms, and apps have productively explored the diversity of tensions surrounding context collapse, as the operation of marginalized identities requires considerable social differentiation work, and locative social media intensify the need for such work. Technologies that are capable of identifying location contribute an additional layer to online identities, as "they can layer physical and virtual spaces, enabling (or forcing) people to present to multiple audiences simultaneously, and to be visible in different ways to these audiences"

(Blackwell et al., 2014: 17). From this perspective, mobile technologies are “technologies of risk” (Albury and Byron, 2016: 2), and location-based apps sustain socio-geographical spaces for queer identity work and sexual sociability, while minimizing the risks inherent in operating in opposition to heteronormative life (Mowlabocus, 2010). As studies of hook-up apps are mostly located in Western urban environments, the diversity of tactics and practices might increase when including non-Western and non-urban contexts (Brown, 2012). Homophobic patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) enforce a concealing of non-normative identities in order avoid stigma and exposure to violence.

A study of lesbian, gay, and bisexual visibility management suggests a scale ranging from “I go out of my way to let people know about my sexual orientation” to “I’m afraid others will reject me if they know I am gay/lesbian/bisexual” (Lasser, Ryser & Price, 2010: 423-235). This invites that we consider queer visibility management in relation to factors such as personal biography, politics, as well as the socio-political situations queer people find themselves in. This suggests that context-differentiation tactics and practices are at play for a diversity of reasons and that context collapse is experienced in different ways and with a range of consequences. This range of norms at work leads to a multiplication of identity work, and the online platforms and services that afford anonymization and pseudonymization are well placed to play an increasingly important role for queer visibility management. The “queer precarity” (Correll, 1995) created by stigmatization of non-hetero sexualities can make anonymity and, later, online pseudonymity important for managing visibility and social relations, as these spaces afford social interaction more conducive to queer sociability. Anonymity becomes a vehicle for the performance of textual bodies that are used to produce digital, non-identified, yet somatically felt encounters (Campbell, 2004). Nevertheless, despite the anonymity, these encounters, as we will argue in our analysis, also follow norms and involve constraints that require tactics of context differentiation and management of queer visibility.

Data, methods, and ethics

This study relies upon interviews with LGBTQ people on Reddit. In total, 50 users were contacted from May to July 2018. Of the 34 users who initially reacted to the questions, 19 answered in full, which constitutes our sample. Interviews were conducted with four female, 13 male, and two non-binary gender respondents. Twelve respondents identify as gay, two as asexual, four as straight, and one as insecure about their sexual orientation. The respondents were geographically rather

dispersed, from Europe, North America, South Asia, and the Middle East. While the influence of local contexts on Reddit use did emerge in the analysis, the study did not systematically follow through on the impact of the intersection of geography and sexuality in terms of differentiation strategies. We return to this issue in the conclusion.

The respondents were sampled by the first author contacting LGBTQ people through Reddit's internal messaging system (private messaging or direct messaging). Interviewees were sampled by reading through selected subreddits such as /r/lgbt, /r/gaybros, /r/trans, and /r/asexuality. Selection of respondents followed a reading of recent posts and comments and their account histories. Structured and semistructured interviews were conducted through the messaging system to guarantee respondents' anonymity. Questions were sent to respondents in written form, and depending on the narratives received in response to the interview questions, follow-up questions were sent. In some cases, the communication developed into a chat-like interaction.

Invitations to interviews were accompanied by a full disclosure regarding the purpose of the study. All respondents consented to participate in the study. Users who did not give clear consent and respondents whose answers were deemed untruthful or unserious (or 'trolling') by the first author were excluded from the study. A limiting factor in the recruitment strategy is that it by design excludes Reddit users who only browse and never use the platform's interactive, communicative features. Such behaviour is in itself an effective strategy for avoiding visibility and context collapse.

Conducting interviews that map out queer spaces, communities, and individuals in a mediated space involves risks. Internet research is particularly productive in thinking about the contextuality and local emergence of sensitivity and vulnerability (Markham and Buchanan, 2012; Tiidenberg, 2018). Interviews might increase the risk of participants submitting information that can potentially harm them and their peers. On the one hand, Reddit's infrastructure offers easy and unchecked access to subreddits, supporting the participants' and researchers' rights to divulge details. On the other hand, the subreddits' social functionalities of developing likeminded communities combined with "throwaway accounts" as a common alternate identity practice (one that is even encouraged in Reddit's FAQs) (Leavitt, 2015: 319) suggest a safe space governed by trust, respect, and shared experience of being a minority. Publishing in these spaces invariably draws in likeminded audiences but also heightens the risk of interference by trolls, hate groups, or simply curious others

who disturb the sense of safety. Anonymity both enhances the ability of marginalized groups to come together and the ability for personal attacks, outings, and hate speech to flourish (for an overview of literature on anonymity, see Christopherson, 2007). Thus, while the research subjects have accepted the risks involved in participation, this is not the case for those who use and perhaps even rely on these subreddits for important emotional support.

When quoting from the interviews, we refer to the respondents by pseudonyms and add relevant personal information. As not all respondents disclosed the same information, there might be variations in the ways in which we reference the interviews, and imprecisions in, for example, age are introduced to minimize risk of identification.

Studying queer Reddit experience is quite complex because while the platform clearly serves a purpose in queer (in)visibility work, it does push into the background many other mediatized modes through which queer thinking, feeling, and socializing arise. A queer media 'diet' may include hook-up apps such as Grindr, Tinder, and Her; fetish social media such as FetLife; unidentified profiles on Instagram (so-called 'finstas'); and group messaging in WeChat or WhatsApp. As we restrict our attention to Reddit, responses to the threat of context collapse might appear more singular and stable than when considered within a user's wider queer media repertoire.

Similarly, viewed in isolation, the study could risk overstating the role anonymity plays in queer sociability and identity formation. It should be noted that, although living a queer life in heteronormative societies is intimately intertwined with negotiating some degree of risk, queer expression can take many other forms than the cautious strategies outlined here. Another approach is to be radically open about aspects of one's identity and desire that many expect to remain hidden in the private sphere. The study does not include performative gestures of activist opposition that are also central to identity formation, community building, and political mobilisation. Such radical transparency is not afforded to everyone, and it is in such instances that identity-agnostic platforms such as Reddit offer an infrastructure for more under-the-radar types of social engagement.

Context differentiation strategies on Reddit

Being gay, transgender or bisexual still carries stigma across the world, which might explain why the interviewees generally display a significant investment in the maintenance of privacy and the

separation of different spheres in their lives. While Reddit offers functionalities that permit anonymous encounters, the risk of context collapse remains a major concern to them. Respondents take a variety of measures to manage and secure interactions that could hurt them if they became visible to an audience other than the one for which they were intended.

In the following, we will explore such practices as they take place at the four levels of context differentiation in relation to Reddit, that we identified in our analytical framework: Somatic, system, inter-platform, and intra-platform. The levels are not mutually exclusive but give an overview of practices for configuring and manipulating Reddit and its surroundings to keep different contexts separated.

Somatic differentiation

Strategically placing and orientating the body toward or away from the digital device is a practice of somatic context differentiation. On a very basic level, the interviewees often referred to Reddit as an online-only sphere that can be separated from ‘in real life’ or irl. Nevertheless, when reflecting upon their practices of using Reddit, it becomes clear that visibly using Reddit in certain contexts requires physical, somatic differentiation strategies of moving their actual bodies to ensure the separation of Reddit from the ‘real world’ setting in which the platform is used. Among the interviewees, the most common differentiation is that of ‘my family’ and ‘my friends’ on the one hand and people ‘online’ and ‘on Reddit’ on the other. Online networks, particularly on Reddit, are described as distinctively different from respondents’ immediate social contacts such as friends and family. This clear distinction between and separation of social worlds (mostly online or offline) mirrors findings from ethnographies of early internet sociabilities. Hook-up app studies have documented a range of ways in which queer people achieve anonymity or degrees thereof by manipulating their physical and digital contexts (Ahlm, 2017; Møller & Nebeling Petersen, 2017; Mowlabocus, 2010). They pay particular attention to the relationship between practices of identity formation and visibility technologies. For mediated queer encounters, the *somatic body* and its immediate surroundings are sites of crucial (in)visibility work. The spatial context of the body and the risks of being in a queer-unfriendly social setting configure the investment in context separation.

Anonymous internet sociability is a form of visibility work that is useful to queer people because it allows for control of time and place of ‘coming out’:

I'm a closeted non-binary to everyone irl [in real life] except my friends and girlfriend, but online I can come out to anyone and receive support. [...] Without Reddit and the internet, I wouldn't have come out at all or found a loving community of people I can trust and confide in. (Robin, non-binary man)

The privacy [on Reddit] allows me to post personal things without any repercussions. [...] I've had one post where I talked about my double life as being a closeted gay senior in high school. It helped me get that off my chest, because I don't really tell anyone how much a toll it has on me. (Andy, 18 years old, gay cis man, USA)

Coming and being out on Reddit, while remaining 'in the closet' (i.e. read as straight) in the social environment in which they are somatically embedded, is a typical scenario among the interviewees. The anonymity granted on Reddit provides a feeling of security and detaches their 'coming out' from their 'real world'. It gives them the possibility of testing queer identity and community engagement with lower risk of expulsion from those perceived conservative social circles that might economically sustain them.

Yet the positioning of the human body in relation to the device, the screen, and other actors can collapse the context of perceived anonymity, as the two 'worlds' are never completely separated. Reddit is used within the context of the immediate physical surroundings, which requires various context differentiation tactics and practices, depending on the social setting. The openness experienced on Reddit has to be carefully shielded off when the setting in which the interaction takes place is at direct odds with.

Perhaps the most obvious instances of context differentiation practices and tactics are those between different geographic and thus socio-political contexts. Geographical *placement* is key to understanding certain risks of context collapse, as Reddit users are placed in different socio-political realities. For Ahmed, who advocates LGBTQ rights through projects in the Middle East, Reddit use in his home country is practically impossible:

Since I'm most of the time outside of my country so I browse normally without much concerns and when I'm in my country I will just stop using until i'm back. Which is to protect my safety more than anything. (Ahmed, late twenties, gay cis man, Middle East/USA)

Ahmed highlights dangers when using LGBTQ-related media such as LGBTQ-subreddits in his Middle Eastern home country. He might be endangering himself by browsing socially unacceptable content, pushing him to take extensive safety precautions. While the direct physical context in which Reddit is used is always a matter of concern, the higher exposure to risk leaves not using the platform at all as the only acceptable strategy. Context differentiation is not only about separating certain aspects of one's life due to norms and social acceptance but is also a means of ensuring safety.

Another risk of context collapse occurs in relation to the physical *orientation* and proximity of the smartphones and laptops to other people in the many social spaces into which these devices so easily enter. This confluence of device mobility and sociability increases the risk of people incidentally seeing smartphone onscreen activity that might 'out' a queer person. Kirsten gives an example of how she avoids using her transgender-identifying account in certain places:

Before I became fully open about being trans at [workplace], I didn't want to have trans stuff show up, while I browsed reddit in public, which I still don't in some situations. (Kirsten, young pansexual transwoman, Denmark)

Kirsten addresses the problem of smartphone use being subject to passing, uninvited gazes of others, which is a threat to her privacy as a transwoman. She segregates this part of her identity into a different account.

The feeling of security created by Reddit's anonymity thus creates openness about various concerns of the LGBTQ community, but the openness interferes in multiple ways with queer individuals' direct physical environments. The somatic context differentiation strategies vary depending on the level of risk introduced by the platform in relation to the somatic environment.

System differentiation

Practices of system differentiation comprise the controlling of automatically generated data flows between interface and user as well as between user and system owners. A related strategy is the manipulation of the device system software, typically in the smartphone, in order to closely manage notifications from queer-identifying services, so that they do not enter unwanted social contexts. These unwanted social contexts might be a person's physical surroundings, and strategies to avoid leakage may include turning down screen brightness, turning off sounds and on-screen notifications, password protection, and hiding queer content such as apps away from the front page or giving them inconspicuous names and icons. Gay partners in some non-monogamous relationships use system manipulation to prevent app use from accidentally announcing itself to the partner (Møller & Nebeling Petersen, 2017). Unwanted context differentiation strategies at the system level turn inward and toward the opacity of social media and technology companies' leveraging of user data. System differentiation strategies to control inward data flows are based on the assumption that social media companies such as Facebook (while being logged onto the account on the smartphone or on a personal computer) connect to other online activities, including Reddit. Inward system differentiation strategies are directed at the risk of context collapse because of information and data flows to Reddit.

Conversely, outward system differentiation strategies are directed at the fear of context collapse from data leaking or moving from a local mobile device screen, a personal computer, or Reddit itself. Jed Brubaker et al. (2016) show how the uninstalling and reinstalling of LGBTQ-specific apps are part of strategies for managing social presence in gay people's lives, in terms of controlling both outward and inward data flows by, for example, deleting the whole user account. In terms of outward system differentiation strategies, the interviewees were generally very invested in separating other social circles as well as institutions of power from their LGBTQ Reddit activity. Sarthak states that:

Every facet of my online activity is protected using 2-factor authentication... This is partly because I used to have a security clearance and have been under surveillance by govt.agencies, and have been targeted by political groups in the past too. (Sarthak, queer man, India)

Sarthak's political-somatic reality makes him fear that his accounts may be hacked. His devices might be subject to data leakage to adversary groups if he loses control of them. Technically advanced password protection of services creates a level of perceived safety to limit the risk of using queer-related subreddits.

Interviewees in less restrictive circumstances describe how they pay considerable attention to unwanted inward data flows:

Outside of reddit I turn off things like Siri and Google Assistant. I don't use Facebook. I also use Duck-DuckGo as my primary search engine, though I still use Google for work. (Bill, 19, USA)

On windows I use regular firefox, with privacy enhancing addons. I block all ads. I use multiple mail accounts for multiple sites, though that's not very efficient. On my android phone I use a custom ROM with privacy guard enabled, allowing me to limit access to apps. Then again, I am using a lot of google products, giving them deep insight into my life, for convenience. (Patrick, 23, 'kinky' straight cisman, Switzerland)

Bill and Patrick invest considerable time and energy in manipulating devices, operating systems, and app preferences in order minimize traceability. This reflects a deep scepticism about the leaking and redirecting of information upon which the often free-to-use commercial services base their business models. Bill and Patrick's concern regarding data leakage is partially based on the value they place in anonymity, which can in turn be part of their need to produce spaces for expression. Patrick acknowledges that he does compromise by using Google's services, in which data leakage is deemed unavoidable. This suggests that system differentiation strategies only allow limited control of inward data flows in contemporary, everyday digital life.

System differentiation strategies are thus employed to protect the screen in its immediate physical environment from the gaze of other people as well as to prevent data flows between systems and other platforms. The practices for protecting oneself from unintended data flows between systems, platforms, and devices are dependent not only on technical skills but also on the perceived level of risk of such data flows. As our interviews show, the tactics and practices of system differentiation vary depending on the geographical location. The risk of surveillance Sarthak mentions might be

less of a concern in a Western metropolitan setting. In the latter settings, while sophisticated system differentiation practices are in place, compromises are made when the advantage of using particular services (such as Google services) exceeds the perceived threat arising from such data flows between Reddit and other systems and platforms.

Inter-platform differentiation

Using multiple platforms with different privacy affordances and communicative cultures in order to separate audiences is a practice of inter-platform differentiation. For the interviewees, Reddit holds a distinct position relative to the other platforms they more or less reluctantly use, such as Facebook and Instagram. Queer media studies show how the work to become sexually available while managing risk is configured differently according to the available “polymedia ensembles” (Hasebrink and Hepp, 2017; Madianou and Miller, 2013). Such *inter-platform differentiation* relies on differences in perceived privacy affordances, audiences, and communicative cultures to inform which expressions go where and how they are modulated. A study of LGBT immigrants in Belgium (Dhoest and Szulc, 2016) finds that context differentiation strategies on Facebook are vastly different from those on hook-up apps. The study shows that queer identity is purely expressed on anonymity-affording chat services, excluding any suggestions of such identities and desires on Facebook. As gay men perceive a range of hook-up apps with only slightly different affordances to require significantly different kinds of sociability, these apps in turn cater to different types of sexual practices and require modulation of self-representation accordingly. Similar context differentiation strategies can be observed on Reddit in relation to other social media platforms.

One interviewee, Fay, explicitly criticizes Facebook’s lack of privacy settings for navigating messages for specific audiences. Most of the interviewees are well aware of both the afforded privacies and the varying communicative cultures of different social media. Alex states:

I don’t use Facebook, Snapchat or Twitter anymore (deleted my accounts) but I use Instagram and Reddit. I figure, those who know me best know my thoughts, why do I need to share them with strangers? (Unless it’s something, like my coming out post, that I want to thank the community for or to help another stranger in need). (Alex, no personal information)

Alex places emphasis on not sharing too much while retaining the possibility to discuss issues such as coming out with others, to look for a community, and to help others in the same situation. A main difference between Reddit and other social media platforms is the anonymity that enables subreddits to sustain community building around precarious identities. Anonymity is crucial for sensitive topics, as Alex demonstrates when mentioning coming-out posts and talking to ‘strangers in need’. That Facebook by default makes visible the user’s connections or ‘friends list’ might be another reason why Reddit is particularly useful to those LGBTQ people who cannot publicly be out as gay. While Patrick considers himself straight, he categorizes himself as ‘kinky’. This self-identification also makes him feel pressure from society to hold back on or hide certain parts of his sexuality, which leads to him applying an inter-platform differentiation strategy:

I am not open on facebook. I am a bit more open on reddit, especially when using alts [throwaway or secondary accounts]. After getting to know people in chats (like telegram) I can become very open and enjoy talks about all kinds of topics. (Patrick)

Patrick performs different degrees of outness or openness depending on the circumstances. These practices serve as a form of funnel that allows him to move contact with a person from kink-excluding to kink-including communicative environments. This illustrates how queer audiences are dynamic and changing as well as how polymedia ensembles of carefully negotiated degrees of outness serve as infrastructures across which queer people can modulate the types and intensities of their relations.

While the context differentiation strategies discussed above are rather technical or based on avoidance in particular physical contexts, inter-platform differentiation strategies are based on the content shared on Reddit compared to and in relation to other platforms. While many interviewees avoid any visibility of their LGBTQ identity on commercial platforms such as Facebook, the openness granted by the anonymity on Reddit allows for negotiations of queer identity. This is supported by the communities in specific subreddits, in which queer sociability is the norm rather than the exception and in which openness about queer identity is expected.

Intra-platform differentiation

Practices of intra-platform differentiation pertain to using no, one, or multiple accounts in order to browse, engage in, and keep separate sub-groups within a single platform. One platform can be used in multiple ways by a user in order to separate contexts. *Intra-platform* differentiation is seen on both identification-centring and identity-agnostic social media. On identification-based platforms such as Facebook, queer immigrants create different profiles and work to keep them and their audiences separate (Dhoest and Szulc, 2016), thereby pushing against their logics in order to sustain participation in both queer-including and queer-excluding communities. We find two interconnected ways in which queer expressions are differentiated and contained using Reddit affordances: *accounts* and/or *subreddits*.

Accountless browsing and multiple account browsing

Reddit offers the possibility for *accountless* browsing, with much of the platform's content being openly accessible to read.² This greatly reduces traceability, in line with other avoidance-based strategies. However, because of the way this study was set up (namely by contacting users on the platform), it does not include cases in which people achieve privacy by employing a way of being a non-user or at least of being invisible to and untraceable by others and of not being associated with the account system.

Another variation is *multiple account use*, the practice of using more than one account in order to experience different aspects of the same platform, while allowing one to operate under different identities. These accounts can be connected to one another, but in most cases the use of two accounts by the same user remains invisible to outsiders. Use of multiple accounts or temporary throwaway accounts ('alts') is quite common among our interviewees. Patrick explains:

I do use multiple accounts, but one is my main account where I do most stuff with. I keep accounts separate for practical reasons. I don't want to mix in adult subreddits into my main account, as to not have to fear ppl glossing over my shoulder constantly.

² At the present time (July 2019), most subreddits are read-only accessible for non-account browsing. This access can be limited by the subreddit moderators to the degree that they can even make them inaccessible when logged in, subject to invitation. Individual users can be banned from accessing a subreddit.

Patrick's use of multiple accounts is mainly motivated by his use of Reddit in public or semipublic spaces where content that he only consumes privately should not be visible. 'Adult content' is separated from the main content by consumption in private spaces, which also requires a separate account to avoid context collapse. This context collapse is experienced through the consumption of private content in (semi-)public spaces.

Subreddits

Like other online platforms, the content on Reddit differs depending on specific groups of frequent interaction, on Reddit called 'subreddits'. For example, Fay and Christina use both LGBTQ and Christian subreddits, operating with often opposing ethics. Their difference in communication culture is very tangible:

On r/bisexual (and r/lgbt to a lesser extent), there's a lot of supportiveness and positivity. The huge number of people makes it a sort of anonymous place, but it's rare to feel shamed or unwanted there. On r/christian, it's a little more like a real-life community in that it involves being acquainted with a small group of people. (Fay, teenage bisexual ciswoman, Canada)

I find that the LGBT Reddit page is definitely friendlier than other subreddits such as the Catholicism Reddit page. Religious Subreddits tend to be more narrow-minded than broader pages. (Christina, lesbian ciswoman, Southern USA)

While both remain important sites of identity work, Fay and Christina keep queer and Christian subreddits completely separate. Among our respondents, using different subreddits in combination with different user accounts is a common strategy for using Reddit in (semi-)public spaces. While situated on the same platform and accessible through the same mechanics, subreddits differ from each other in subjects discussed, their 'rules' and social norms, and consequently the audiences they attract. Each subreddit has a specific set of cultural codes and is perceived and treated differently. Rules and expectations for users are also a reason why thematically similar subreddits can differ in content. '/r/trans' mostly serves as a self-help and discussion platform, while '/r/transgender' is mostly for sharing trans-related news.

While the LGBTQ Reddit users in our study clearly argue that the anonymity grants them the possibility to be open about queer identity, the specific subreddits in which they do so have their own norms of what constitutes good content and forms of sociability. While openness about queer identity is expected in these contexts, other parts of their identity (such as religion) require a different context. Intra-platform differentiation strategies (such as using different accounts) are applied to manage audiences of different subreddits and their social norms and expectations as well as, again, the immediate physical environment (such as work and private). The anonymity granted by the platform thus does not remove the problem of context collapse but instead introduces different norms of queer sociability and identity negotiations that require intra-platform context differentiation practices.

(Queer) living in a leaky data culture

This study shows that becoming and remaining anonymous requires that the internet user masters and applies a complex set of differentiation strategies. Queer Reddit users employ context differentiation strategies despite the fact that the platform requires very little user information. Depending on their geopolitical placement and degree of precarity, queer Reddit users adopt various strategies of intermittent use and non-use. The physical orientation of screens and bodies are intensely surveilled and controlled in order to avoid or block unwelcome glances at the information that operating systems push. Some individuals use technical circumvention strategies to limit the platforms' default harvesting and circulation of data by device and service providers. These practices rely heavily on users' understanding of the different privacy affordances, audiences, and communicative cultures of the many communication platforms available to establish a repertoire of differentiation strategies. The different community and communication cultures that might operate side-by-side *within* a single platform require that users adopt careful browsing strategies to alleviate the risk of unwanted information flows.

These findings contribute to a general body of work that surveys context collapse in anonymous platform use. While we focus on a platform that invites anonymity, it has been shown that identity-oriented platforms such as Facebook can also be subject to refined sociotechnical work to separate audiences (Costa, 2018; Duguay, 2016). Our analysis deepens our knowledge of how local cultures and politics affect which measures of control are selected. The findings also complicate Costa's somewhat sweeping argument that, in the context of a Turkish city, media have not increased the

sense of context collapse among interviewees. They argue that this is “because the public-facing Facebook is a reproduction of a traditional public context that has existed well before the diffusion of social media” (Costa, 2018: 3648). Beyond remaining critical of the rejection of context collapse as a common experience for these majority publics, we find that it does underscore how contemporary queer world building often requires radical separation of social spheres online. It has been argued that the *perception* of afforded anonymity predicts the uptake of throwaway Reddit accounts on Reddit, particularly among women (Leavitt, 2015), another at-risk group. However, whether or not threats to safety and privacy among our respondents are ‘real’ or merely perceived, it is clear that they motivate strategies of context differentiation among some marginalised subjects.

This study focuses on under-the-radar types of social engagement, thereby bracketing off other important modes of queer socialisation, perhaps most importantly modes of radical transparency that have historically underpinned queer identity formation, community building, and political mobilisation. However, as we have argued, such radical transparency is not equally available to all, with the intersection of gender, age, race, nationality, citizenship, and class with sexuality describing the uneven distribution of such liberties. While the study does highlight some transnational issues that hint at the disproportionate marginalisation of non-Western and trans people, it is poorly positioned to take on such intersectional analysis. What it *does* offer is documentation of the caution and suspicion with which some queer people take up identity-agnostic platforms such as Reddit.

Generally, beyond the case of LGBTQ and minority populations, the study makes clear that, in order to understand the social life of imminent context collapse, we must not only understand the audiences or cultures that are to be kept separate but also how digital media are materially configured in order to contain and separate social spheres. It is, in other words, an ongoing sociotechnical process of multi-level affordance manipulation at the somatic, system, and platform scales. At the same time, we should not ignore how this intense differentiation work is a result of contemporary data culture. This culture is, by way of hacks and poor data management, perpetually leaking, constituting a sort of context collapse that is practically unmanageable by any single media user alone. This calls for systematic analytical, political, and activist interventions as well as raises further questions regarding how studies of context collapse might contribute to such a critical project.

References

- Ahlm J (2017) Respectable promiscuity: Digital cruising in an era of queer liberalism. *Sexualities* 20(3): 364–379.
- Albury K and Byron P (2016) Safe on My Phone? Same-Sex Attracted Young People's Negotiations of Intimacy, Visibility, and Risk on Digital Hook-Up Apps. *Social Media + Society* 2(4): 1–10.
- Beam MA, Child JT, Hutchens MJ, et al. (2018) Context collapse and privacy management: Diversity in Facebook friends increases online news reading and sharing. *New Media & Society* 20(7): 2296–2314.
- Berlant L and Warner M (1998) Sex in Public. *Critical Inquiry* 24(2):
- Blackwell C, Birnholtz J and Abbott C (2014) Seeing and being seen: Co-situation and impression formation using Grindr, a location-aware gay dating app. *New Media & Society* 17(7): 1117–1136.
- boyd dm (2008) *Taken out of context: American teen sociality in networked publics*. University of California, Berkeley.
- boyd dm and Ellison NB (2007) Social Network Sites: definitions, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 38(3) 38(3): 16–31.
- Brown G (2012) Homonormativity: A metropolitan concept that denigrates “ordinary” gay lives. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 59(7): 1065-1072.
- Brubaker JR, Ananny M and Crawford K (2016) Departing glances: A sociotechnical account of ‘leaving’ Grindr. *New Media & Society* 18(3): 373–390.
- Campbell JE (2004) *Getting It On Online. Cyberspace, Gay Male Sexuality, and Embodied Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Christopherson, K. M. (2007). The positive and negative implications of anonymity in Internet social interactions: “On the Internet, Nobody Knows You’re a Dog”. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 23(6), 3038-3056.
- Correll S (1995) The ethnography of an electronic bar: The Lesbian Cafe. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 24(3): 270–298.
- Costa E (2018) Affordances-in-practice: An ethnographic critique of social media logic and context collapse. *New Media and Society* 20(10): 3641–3656.
- Davis JL and Jurgenson N (2014) Context collapse: theorizing context collusions and collisions. *Information, Communication & Society* 17(4): 476–485.
- Dennen VP and Burner KJ (2017) Identity, context collapse, and Facebook use in higher education: putting presence and privacy at odds. *Distance Education* 38(2): 173–192.

- Dhoest A and Szulc L (2016) Navigating online selves: Social, cultural, and material contexts of social media use by diasporic gay men. *Social Media+ Society* 2(4): 1–10.
- Diplacido J (1998) Minority Stress among Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals: A Consequence of Heterosexism, Homophobia, and Stigmatization. In: *Stigma and Sexual Orientation: Understanding Prejudice against Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals*. 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks California 91320 United States: SAGE Publications, Inc., pp. 138–159.
- Van Dijck J (2013) *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford University Press.
- Duggan L (2002) The new homonormativity: The sexual politics of neoliberalism. In: Pease DE, Dayan J, and Flores R (eds) *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 175–194.
- Duguay S (2016) “He has a way gayer Facebook than I do”: Investigating sexual identity disclosure and context collapse on a social networking site. *New Media & Society* 18(6): 891–907.
- Hasebrink U and Hepp A (2017) How to research cross-media practices? Investigating media repertoires and media ensembles. *Convergence* 23(4): 362–377.
- Lasser J, Ryser G R and Price L R (2010) Development of a lesbian, gay, bisexual visibility management scale. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 57(3): 415-428.
- Leavitt A (2015) This is a throwaway account: Temporary technical identities and perceptions of anonymity in a massive online community. In *Proceedings of the 18th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing* (pp. 317-327). ACM.
- Madianou M and Miller D (2013) Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16(2): 169–187.
- Markham, A. and Buchanan, E., 2012. Ethical decision-making and internet research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0).
- Marwick AE and boyd d (2011) I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society* 13(1): 114–133.
- Marwick AE and boyd d (2014) Networked privacy: How teenagers negotiate context in social media. *New Media & Society* 16(7): 1051–1067.
- Meyrowitz J (1985) *No Sense of Place*. Oxford University Press.
- Møller K and Nebeling Petersen M (2017) Bleeding boundaries: Domesticating gay hook-up apps. In: Andreassen R, Harrison K, Nebeling M, et al. (eds) *New Media – New Intimacies: Connectivities, Relationalities, Proximities*. London: Routledge, pp. 208–223.
- Mowlabocus S (2010) *Gaydar Culture: Gay Men, Technology and Embodiment in the Digital Age*. Farnham: Ashgate.

- Ng E (2013) A “post-gay” era? Media gaystreaming, homonormativity, and the politics of LGBT integration. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 6(2): 258-283.
- Nissenbaum H (2009) *Privacy in Context: Technology, Policy, and the Integrity of Social Life*. Stanford University Press.
- Rich A (1980) Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence. *Signs* 5(4): 631–660.
- Robards B (2018) ‘Totally straight’: Contested sexual identities on social media site reddit. *Sexualities* 21(1–2): 49–67.
- Tiidenberg K (2018) Research Ethics, Vulnerability, and Trust on the Internet. In: Hunsinger J, Klastrup L, and Allen MM (eds) *Second International Handbook of Internet Research*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, pp. 1–15.
- van der Nagel E (2013) ‘Faceless Bodies: Negotiating Technological and Cultural Codes on reddit gonewild’. *Journal of Media Arts Culture* 10(2): 1–14.
- van der Nagel E and Frith J (2015) Anonymity, pseudonymity, and the agency of online identity: Examining the social practices of r/Gonewild. *First Monday* 20(3).
- Vitak J (2012) The impact of context collapse and privacy on social network site disclosures. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56(4): 451–470.
- Warner M (2002) Publics and Counterpublics (abbreviated version). *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88(4): 413–425.
- Wesch M (2009) Youtube and you: Experiences of self-awareness in the context collapse of the recording webcam. *Explorations in Media Ecology* 8(2): 19–34.
- Workman H (2014) *Formation of safe spaces in gendered online communities: reddit and ‘the front page of the internet’*. Texas Christian University.