

# Sexual and gender identity work on social media

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## Funding information

UKRI England, Grant/Award Number: QR  
Strategic Priorities Fund

## Abstract

How do sexual and gender minorities use social media to express themselves and construct their identities? We discuss findings drawn from focus groups conducted with 17 sexual and gender minority social media users who shared their experiences of online harms. They include people with gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, queer, asexual, non-binary, pansexual, poly, and kink (LGBTQ+) identities. We find that sexual and gender minorities face several challenges online, but that social media platforms provide important spaces for them to feel understood and accepted. We use Goffman's work to explore how sexual and gender minorities engage in 'front region' performances online as part of their identity work. We then turn to Hochschild's concepts of 'feeling rules' and 'framing rules' to argue that presentations of self, or front region performances, must include the role of feelings and how they are socially influenced to be understood.

## KEYWORDS

digital platforms, gender, identity, sexualities, stigma

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Understanding the role of digital technologies in identity work is increasingly significant in sociology, as suggested in recent academic accounts (Baker & Walsh, 2018; Lupton, 2014; Mercea et al., 2018). This reflects the prominence of online spaces in our everyday lives and in how we construct and communicate identities, with evidence also suggesting that digital platforms play an important role in our personal and intimate lives (Adams-Santos, 2020;

We declare that all authors have agreed to this submission and the article is not currently being considered for publication by any other print or electronic journal.

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Das & Farber, 2020). Moreover, gender and sexual minorities use online spaces for positive personal development and exploration, to inform friendships (Manago & Vaughn, 2015), sexual culture (De Ridder, 2017; Wignall, 2022), and as a source of information and support (Craig et al., 2021; Jenzen, 2017). Despite the positive role of digital platforms, sexual and gender minorities face challenges in navigating their way round online spaces, encountering online harms (Bezrah et al., 2012; Keighley, 2022). The discrimination experienced offline is reproduced in online spaces, reflecting the social stigma associated with 'non-normative'<sup>1</sup> gender and sexual identities (Colosi & Lister, 2019; Todd, 2020). In extending existing discussions, this article draws upon the findings of a recent study which sought to explore sexual and gender minorities' experiences of online discrimination. The findings indicate digital platforms are complex spaces in which users face multiple challenges impinging on their construction of identity, and yet, despite some negative experiences, online spaces still play an important role in affirming gender and sexual identities and providing a sense of community. In discussing our findings, we apply Goffman's concept of 'front region' to demonstrate how sexual and gender minorities engage with digital platforms to construct identities. We argue that despite online spaces helping these minorities to self-affirm, there are several barriers inhibiting them to construct 'front region' performances freely. It is here, we argue, that 'back region' interactions (note that the focus groups—see 'methods' - acted as a back region) provide space to respond to and internalise the 'front region' performances, which includes acknowledging the long-term discrimination experienced by sexual and gender minorities. To further conceptualise online 'performances' and experiences, we use Hochschild's 'feeling rules' and 'framing rules', highlighting the conflicting discourses experienced by minorities in constructing 'front region' performances, as well as highlighting the role of 'back region' spaces in enabling emotional reflexivity. The arguments put forward in this article advance the application of Goffman's work, firstly, by offering space to explore the narrative of *feelings* in the context of online front region 'performance' (Goffman, 1959), highlighting the relevance of feeling rules and framing rules (Hochschild, 1979) in the presentation of self. Secondly, in exploring the front region and back region, the interactive nature of the two is emphasised by arguing that the back region acts as an emotionally reflexive space where future performances are refined. Finally, we argue the paradox of feeling and framing rules, experienced by sexual and gender minorities, is significant in how they present themselves across digital platforms.

## 1.1 | Identity work online

An emerging body of literature in sociology indicates digital platforms are increasingly significant in how we engage with our sexual and gendered lives (Adams-Santos, 2020; Das & Farber, 2020). Moreover, research suggests that social media sites are meaningful in the identity work of gender and sexual minorities (Colosi & Lister, 2019; Craig et al., 2021; Das & Farber, 2020; Livingstone, 2008; Miller, 2017; Sarabia & Estevez, 2016; Wignall, 2017, 2022); offering marginalised individuals a space to construct identities in, as part of a process of self-exploration and affirmation (Albury, 2017; McInroy et al., 2019). As Das and Farber (2020) indicate "the Internet can function as a place of transcendence and freedom" and signpost YouTube and personal vlogs as examples of digital spaces in which sexual and gender minorities are able to 'redefine dominant conceptions of identity' (p. 11). The idea that digital platforms offer opportunities to subvert heteronormativity is supported by other researchers (Albury, 2017; Bates et al., 2020; Colosi & Lister, 2019; Farber, 2017; O'Neill, 2014). For instance, Bates et al. (2020) explored digital platforms in the 'narrative identity development' of young sexual and gender minorities; their findings indicate that online spaces 'have become a transformative tool' which can be used to 'perform differing identity work' (p. 77). Moreover, in facilitating different expressions of identity, the multifaceted nature of digital media is highlighted, whereby multiple platforms are used simultaneously to help sexual and gender minorities manage the presentation of self (Bates et al., 2020; Colosi & Lister, 2019). Despite the benefits of online spaces for sexual and gender minorities, and as a space created to facilitate 'self-presentation' (Das & Farber, 2020), digital platforms do not always provide sanctuary for these communities, with online hostility identified as a significant challenge (Gámez-Guadix & Incera, 2021; Keighley, 2022; Marciano & Antebi-Gruszka, 2022; Reer et al., 2019; Utz & Breuer, 2017). There is evidence that sexual and gender identities considered to be

non-normative experience stigma on mainstream digital platforms (Bezrah et al., 2012; Brickell, 2012; Colosi & Lister, 2019; Dooley, et al., 2009; Duguay, 2016a; Reer et al., 2019; Todd, 2020), indicative of the heteronormative function of those platforms (Das & Farber, 2020; Fraser, 2010; O'Neill, 2014). Moreover, research indicates gender and sexual minorities are policed on digital platforms via the Terms and Conditions used by online sites to govern user behaviour, and via the responses, or anticipated responses of users who may shame, or direct abuse towards those communities (Albury, 2017; Colosi & Lister, 2019; Todd, 2020). This leads to feelings of exclusion amongst minorities, with implications for their overall sense of wellbeing (Reer et al., 2019; Strauss et al., 2020; Utz & Breuer, 2017). The stigmatisation of non-normative sexuality and gender has further repercussions for how gender and sexual minorities manage and present their online identities, with individuals expressing the need to be cautious during online interactions (Bezrah et al., 2012; Colosi & Lister, 2019; Sarabia & Estevez, 2016). The literature clearly highlights that whilst digital platforms facilitate positive experiences for sexual and gender minorities, heteronormativity is pervasive and leads to significant challenges for marginalised sexually and gender diverse people engaging in online spaces. In the next part of this article, we will discuss the work of Goffman and Hochschild, indicating its theoretical value in exploring identity work, providing context for the analysis of our findings.

## 1.2 | Theorising online performances

Goffman's work, *Presentations of Self in Everyday Life*, is well established in sociology and has provided a dramaturgical lens to explore the 'performances' of sexual and gender minorities in different settings (see Brickell, 2005; Coley, 2020; LaVoï & Glassford, 2021; Nealy, 2017). Moreover, in employing or reviewing Goffman's work, researchers have examined ways in which gender and sexual minorities use online platforms to present their identities to others (see Conner, 2018; Duguay, 2016a; Hogan, 2010). For instance, Duguay (2016a) suggests that the presentation of self online by young gender and sexual minorities can be challenging to manage. Here, Duguay draws upon Marwick & Boyd's (2011) concept of 'context collapse', in which individuals engage with multiple performances simultaneously across digital platforms potentially presenting different versions of themselves, making it difficult to manage how they are seen by others. This concept extends Goffman's work, utilising the idea of 'front region', a performance space where we aim to act as we want to be seen, playing to our audience (1959: 110); 'context collapse' highlights the difficulty of managing front region performances online, where there is a compression of spatial, temporal, and social boundaries, not experienced with face-to-face encounters (Duguay, 2016a). Here it is argued that Goffman's work cannot sufficiently explain the impact of technology on how people communicate and manage those identities (Ellison & Boyd, 2013). However, the concept of 'front region' still provides insight about the role of social rules in our attempts to construct presentations of self in online and offline spaces.

In advancing Goffman's work, Ditchfield (2020) draws upon the idea of 'back region', a concept which signals spaces where we may act in line with how we really think/feel, and where we practise and adjust our performances for the front region (Goffman, 1959, p. 114). Whilst some research indicates that there is a level of impulsivity in online posting (Kaakinen et al., 2020), other researchers recognise that there are instances of planning in online conduct. Here, Ditchfield (2020) recognises the value of back regions in online spaces. She reconceptualises the back region in the context of pre-posts on digital platforms, which includes the 'work' that occurs behind the screen before posts are shared, where performances are prepared. Ditchfield argues the back region is the rehearsal stage of online interactions, helping to maintain consistency in performances and enabling individuals to construct their ideal identity. This work is significant as it draws attention to the region hidden from the audience, providing insights into how performances are constructed for the presentation of self in online spaces. Ditchfield (2020) prompts important questions about the use of the back region or rehearsal stages, but also indicates that behaviour in both the back and front regions need further analysis, drawing upon conceptual tools beyond those offered by Goffman.

### 1.3 | Emotion in online performance

Whilst Goffman's work has taken a more central role in providing sociological explanations for the interactions of gender and sexual minorities, Hochschild offers important insights into the feelings associated with identity construction. Conceptually, Goffman's work explains the different *performances* given in different social contexts, shaped by social rules. However, Hochschild (1979) argues his work does not account for the emotional responses, including how people may feel and/or try to feel in different social situations. Conversely, Hochschild offers an 'interactional account of emotion... 'between' the Goffmanian focus on consciously designed appearance on the one hand and the Freudian focus on unconscious intrapsychic events on the other' (1979: 555). Like Goffman, Hochschild supports the need to understand the role of social rules in shaping human interaction, acknowledging that interaction can be performative, however, she offers further insight into the layers of social rules, and the internal management of emotions (1979; 1982).

Hochschild contends emotional displays during social interactions are influenced by 'feeling rules', shaping our display of emotions in different social situations. The 'feeling rules' are dependent upon the ideologies implicit in 'framing rules'; these rules help to set up feeling rules by defining the meaning of a situation, building on the emotionally depthless social rules inferred by Goffman (1959). Although Goffman's work demonstrates the uses of front and back regions, he does not focus on the internal management of feelings, nor does he distinguish between the different responses a social actor gives in a performance. In response to this, Hochschild (1979: 558) indicates there are two ways feelings are situated in social interaction: 'deep acting' (or 'emotion work') and 'surface acting'; the latter is akin to 'expression control' (Goffman, 1959, p. 59). 'Emotion work' refers to the effort we put in to work on our emotions, to modify how we feel, to mirror 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1979, 1983). The value of Hochschild's concept of 'emotion work', is suggested in the exploration of a range of social phenomena (Bolton, 2005; Brennan, 2006; Colosi, 2010; Erikson, 2005; Lewis, 2005; Williams, 2012) which emphasises the importance of understanding the role of emotion in social enquiry, but also in how different conditions may bring about a need to change how we feel, emphasising the significance of 'feeling rules'. Svensson (2013) uses Hochschild's work to explore the emotion displays of young people online and identify the management of feelings in those spaces. As reflected in the application of her work, an emotional script is part of front region performances. Moreover, it is demonstrated how 'feeling rules' shape the nature of those performances, as much as wider social norms. Given this, Hochschild's ideas can also offer important insight into the ways in which social actors use the back region as an *emotionally reflexive* space to modify future front region interactions.

## 2 | METHODS

The research discussed in this article explored sexual and gender minorities' experiences of online discrimination, with an aim of working with participants to co-produce an anti-discrimination toolkit to help tackle online abuse. For pragmatic reasons convenience sampling was used to select seventeen participants, which included LGB and Trans communities,<sup>2</sup> and people who practice kink<sup>3</sup>; people representing these categories are widely identified as gender and sexual minorities (Silva, 2022; Colosi & Lister, 2019; Sarabia & Estevez, 2016; Wignall, 2017). We generated our sample by posting adverts on digital platform group pages and approached existing contacts who had taken part in previous projects. Recruitment took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and resulted in inevitable access issues. Participants were aged between 21 and 68, with three participants identifying as non-binary, one as trans male, one as trans female, eight as cis female, and four as cis male. The sexuality of the participants was diverse, with two identifying as asexual, four as bisexual, two as gay, two as lesbian, one as pansexual, three as poly, one as queer, and two undeclared. There was some ethnic diversity, with one participant identifying as South Asian and Afro-Caribbean, however, a more diverse range of participants representing members from different sections of society would have enhanced the study.

The project involved six focus groups conducted online; this was primarily due to restrictions imposed because of the pandemic. This approach allowed participation regardless of geographical location (in England) and enabled some participants to remain visually anonymous, using audio only. The focus groups were arranged in relation to the gender and sexual identities of the participants. For example, one group (FG1) represented members from trans communities, the second group (FG2) represented members from LGB communities, and the third group (FG3), represented members from kink communities. The focus group method enabled participants to collectively identify relevant themes for the toolkit and was an effective method for successful co-production. It is important to note that there was overlap between focus groups, with some participants identifying as part of the LGB and kink communities, and/or kink and trans communities. The reasons for dividing the participants into different categories was three-fold. Firstly, it acknowledged the participants' unique experiences and challenges based on their minority status; secondly, it created a safe space for participants to engage in meaningful discussions; finally, it allowed for comparisons to be made during later stages of analysis. Whilst there was some overlap in views and experiences between focus groups, we considered differences during the analysis and writing up process. Despite differences, there was a clear sense of solidarity between groups, because of the shared experience of social stigmatisation due to their gender and/or sexual identities.

Findings were analysed using a reflexive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019) which facilitated in-depth analysis of the participants' narratives; this was done manually, without the use of software such as NVivo. Here, via the use of coding, we identified key findings discussed in this article. Analysis by hand was helpful, enabling us to assess the participants' narratives with sensitivity and care, with the context of the specific dialogue maintained.

Given the sensitive nature of the project we considered a range of ethical implications carefully throughout the research process. We took care to inform and gain consent from all the participants and protected their identity by using pseudonyms and excluding any findings that would identify or cause harm to them. The project was granted institutional ethical approval, a condition which needed to be met prior to starting the study.

### 3 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section we will explore the key findings from the project. Firstly, by discussing the role of digital platforms in the construction and management of gender and sexual identities, which was a major theme to emerge from our research. Here we demonstrate how identity work on digital platforms is an example of front region performances, where sexual and gender minorities seek identity affirmation. Secondly, we apply Hochschild's ideas to argue that the front region should be considered in terms of 'feeling rules' and 'framing' rules, helping to provide an emotional script to front region performances.

For context, we will first consider the general patterns of platform usage. During the focus group discussions, it became evident that online spaces were important to our participants, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, FetLife, Reddit, Snapchat, Tumblr, Whiplr, and WhatsApp.<sup>4</sup> Participants indicated they used digital platforms for multiple reasons, including connecting with friends and family, arranging meet ups and events, work communication, connecting with individuals from different gender and sexual minority groups, and as a source of support in periods of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant described Facebook as 'a place of sanity' keeping her connected to people outside of her home; the popularity of Facebook is suggested in existing research (Lehart, 2015).

Some of the participants in FG1 felt able to use mainstream platforms, such as Twitter, to connect with trans users; this was unanimously identified as a key benefit of digital platforms. Here participants suggested it facilitated a sense of community amongst both sexual and gender minorities:

**Mark (FG1):** "One thing with Twitter is it's absolutely that sense of community, (it) is so much easier to find... Twitter has been helping me to find more people, more accepting people, and it's a better experience overall."

Moreover, what was indicated by Mark and others, is that there is a strong sense of community and unity between different sexual and gender minorities on digital platforms, helping to create safe spaces for marginalised people, also suggested in other accounts (see Wignall, 2022).

### 3.1 | Front region performances on digital platforms - constructing, managing, and affirming identities

A major theme from our findings relates to the construction and management of identity. Here it was indicated that digital platforms were significant in the identity work of our participants, reinforcing existing evidence (see Colosi & Lister, 2019; Craig et al., 2021; Livingstone, 2008; Miller, 2017; Sarabia & Estevez, 2016; Wignall, 2022). Moreover, our findings suggest sexual and gender minorities use digital platforms to construct favourable identities, offering opportunities to affirm their sexuality and/or gender, in line with Goffman's account of front region performances (1959). The importance of engaging in front region performances was acknowledged unanimously across F1, 2, and 3. For trans participants, having spaces to present their gender identities provided opportunities for acceptance and identity affirmation, highlighting the positive role of online sites in establishing identity. Suggested by Mark (FG1):

I owe it to myself to talk openly about my gender and sexual identity...it's something I struggled with for a long time, and I think talking about that online, not necessarily to other people, talking to the void and tweeting things, and putting things on Facebook, it is a process of realising who you actually are. And having the support for like social networks, it does like help because it makes you feel more accepted really at the end of the day.

In presenting front region performances, 'selfies' were identified as an important way of establishing and affirming identity; this is supported by existing research (Dugauy, Sarabia & Estevez, 2016). On digital platforms it is evident that profile selfies are part of what Goffman refers to as 'front', representing 'props' (1959: 32) to help construct and present front region performances. The importance of selfies whilst 'coming out' was stressed by some of the trans participants. Here, Jane (FG1), a trans woman, used pictures on her Facebook account to signal her gender identity: "*I take pictures, I post pictures because it's important for the identity of me; to see myself; see how others see me.*"

Likewise, Steve (FG1), a trans man, highlighted his engagement with identity work, and acknowledged the importance of posting pictures as part of a self-affirming process:

I'd been wanting to post the pictures to Facebook and Twitter as well, of my progress in my journey so far, because it's quite an affirming practise, and I know some of my non-trans friends have said—Why do you post so many pictures, why do you take so many pictures? I think because it is kind of vital, not only for myself to see that I'm making progress, but for other people to affirm that I'm making progress as well. It's definitely been pivotal in my journey thus far.

The importance of visual enabling platforms was indicated by other participants from FG2, such as Val: "*...pictures showing on platforms or media sharing platforms do provide a space for self-expression, and being able to share...*". The significance of visual digital platforms, such as Instagram, has been discussed elsewhere (Dugauy, 2016b; Wargo, 2015). According to Dugauy (2016b) and Raun (2014) the use of photo and video blogs provide opportunities to claim a sense of gender identity for trans individuals. Our evidence highlights how 'props' (Goffman, 1959), such as photographs, are important in helping to construct and convey identity to others and to oneself.

Unlike the participants from FG1 and FG2, those from FG3, felt unable to express their kink identity on *mainstream* digital platforms, which are dominated by heteronormative values (Colosi & Lister, 2019). As suggested here, social rules not only direct the *nature* of front region performances (Goffman, 1959), but also *where* they take place. For participants in FG3, alternative sites such as FetLife and Whiplr were identified as safe online spaces in which they could engage freely with identity work. The importance of alternative platforms for people who practice kink is also emphasised elsewhere (see Albury, 2017; Colosi & Lister, 2019; Wignall, 2022).

In discussing FetLife, participants stated that one of the benefits of this site was how kink practices were categorised. This enabled users to selectively engage with individuals with shared kink interests:

**Verity (FG3):** There are kind of elements of FetLife, that I quite like: how things are categorised etc that can be quite good from the point of view of finding people who are specifically into the same thing you are. I would rather talk about something I was specifically interested in, so I like that about it.

As well as the use of 'props' discussed in relation to trans participants, the findings draw attention to the role of place, represented by different digital platforms, and how front region performances are directed towards different and interested audiences (Adams-Santos, 2020). Here it is suggested that identities are carefully managed and constructed in spaces in which they are likely to be affirmed.

### 3.2 | Barriers to identity work

Within the broader theme of identity construction and management, our findings indicated an important subtheme relating to barriers to identity work. Although there was a sense of release and liberation evoked by users' ability to engage in front region performances online, participants also acknowledged there were factors which hindered self-expression. Examples included hostile responses (experienced or anticipated) of users; and bio-descriptor limitations on profile settings (this was often the case for mainstream platforms such as Facebook). It is important to note that although barriers discussed were problematised by most participants, they *experienced* restrictions differently. For instance, as previously suggested, kink participants felt discouraged from disclosing or discussing their sexual interests on mainstream platforms; with their practices excluded due to wider informal policing conducted by other users, and digital platform policy,<sup>5</sup> as well as bio-descriptor limitations. As highlighted below, the exclusion experienced by kinksters is often fuelled by the *direct* experience of discrimination:

**Andy (FG1):** I've had quite a lot of negative experiences.... I kind of knew what I was signing up for that because I'm out, and because my sexuality is how I've been making a living for the last 20 years, making films or whatever. I kind of knew I was putting myself in the firing line a bit...I've had fairly regular attacking threads from people saying that they wish that I'd had cancer, and making death threats to me and stuff like that, because being a dominant guy, into SM and being out; people who don't understand the scene think you are a viable target for that sort of thing.

Other kinksters, such as Brenda (FG1), make attempts to avoid scrutiny; this scrutiny is often provoked by a limited understanding of the kink scene:

I'm just really bored of having to explain it to vanillas. If you say you are kinky or poly or whatever, people will think that is an invitation for really long in depth in just discussion about the morality and ethics of it; but I've spent 20 years having that discussion every day, and I'm just fed up explaining it really. So I tend to not mention it unless I need to, just avoid those conversations.

This follows the arguments that kink is misunderstood and is oppositional to heteronormative values (Colosi & Lister, 2019; Lin, 2017). As previously discussed, this resulted in kink practitioners finding alternative platforms for front region performances to engage in identity work.

All participants across the focus groups were aware of instances of homophobia and transphobia on mainstream digital platforms, with suggestions that 'trolling' was an issue due to the anonymity of online communication. For trans participants, user hostility was often anticipated in relation to the use of pronouns; although participants highlighted that they were an important way to express and establish gender identity, some indicated the use of pronouns is contentious:

**Ali (FG1):** I put my pronouns in the bio section, but that does tend to leave a target on my back because it is generally speaking mostly only to other trans individuals that put that stuff in their bio's. It's kind of leaving that open for other people too—Oh, that person has got pronouns, that means they are probably going to be trans.

**Steve (FG1):** I decided getting into discussions with people simply wasn't worth it anymore. And so I eventually came to the decision to just take my pronouns out of my bio, and just hope that the way I presented in the pictures I post, Or the videos and things like that, that I post; or in the way that I talk in my post as well, came off that I was a guy or at least the trans guy.

Despite some reluctance to use pronouns due to the fear of stigmatisation, trans participants emphasised that limitations on platform bio descriptors, preventing the inclusion of pronouns, was detrimental as it created opportunities for inappropriate labelling (misnaming) and online abuse. The universal usage of pronouns was encouraged by most participants across focus groups, as this was thought to normalise the use of pronouns on bio descriptors and demonstrate solidarity between different communities, preventing hostility and misnaming. Despite mainstream platforms such as Twitter and Instagram providing space in the bio-descriptors to include pronouns, at the time the research was conducted Facebook did not. On platforms where bio-descriptors provide space to include pronouns, there is little evidence that users are including them outside of gender and sexual minority groups. The importance of including pronouns is emphasised by charities and support networks representing sexual and gender minorities,<sup>6</sup> who encourage people across different communities to use them on digital platforms and email signatures.

The stigmatisation of gender and sexual minorities was acknowledged unanimously by participants who identified that the main barrier to identity work related to user hostility, with significant fear of being shamed and 'othered' because of their gender and/or sexual identities. Participants across focus groups indicated that they created and used multiple accounts on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook; in this way they felt they could limit information about their gender and/or sexual identity/ies, which could then be safely managed. The accounts of hostility experienced or anticipated was evident amongst lgb, trans and kink communities.<sup>7</sup> Two examples are included below:

**Mel (FG2):** I posted something on social media where it related to my sexual identity, and a lot of derogatory comments.... I then felt scared to post anything else because I was like if this can happen now, what happens in six months time when I post something else, it could get worse. It was quite scarring emotionally and mentally.

**Brenda (FG3):** All of the discrimination that I have had online has been from non-kinky people; or people that were questionable. and it's usually a moralising stance they take. It's a sort of crusade.

This suggests that sexual and gender diverse identities are subjected to informal policing. Here users control content on digital platforms through stigmatising and ostracising individuals (Brickell, 2012; Colosi & Lister, 2019; Duguay, 2016a). For participants in our study, it was often the *fear* of being shamed, as well as the direct experience of discrimination, as highlighted earlier, which regulated their conduct. Significantly, there were differences in how participants internalised this. For instance, participants who were part of the kink community appeared to accept their deviant label, suggesting that they sought *tolerance* rather than *acceptance*: *'I'd rather just be tolerated and not be*



judged. *I don't necessarily need to be included, because they probably won't be interested in what they are doing.*" (Beth - FG3). This was further discussed by Verity:

From my standpoint there are different strands of my sexual identity, which some I would expect to be included some I would expect to be tolerated. I'm bi, and I'm also poly, and I'm also kinky. And those to me are quite different in terms of my expectations of society. I don't really expect people to be particularly inclusive of my kinkiness.

The narrative of tolerance was unique to FG3 participants, but not expressed by lgb or trans participants who used language suggesting they wanted *acceptance* and *inclusion*; this again reflects the highly deviant constructions of kink practices (Colosi & Lister, 2019; Lin, 2017). Significantly, many kink practices are not protected by law in the UK; we contend that the legal protections for sexual and gender minorities is important in helping to encourage wider social acceptance and to safeguard their wellbeing (Todd, 2020).

### 3.3 | Reflecting on and contextualising front stage performances

As the findings discussed have suggested, on digital platforms front region performances, as part of the identity work of sexual and gender minorities, are driven by wider social rules (Goffman, 1959), as well as specific conditions set by the platforms. In this part of the article, we highlight how Hochschild's work provides further context for the front region performances considered in our paper, helping us to identify and understand the emotional script of those performances, and back region interactions. We argue that the wider social structures and rules relating to *how* we construct our feelings (Hochschild, 1979) are significant. Here Hochschild contends that 'feeling rules' are directed by 'framing rules', which emerge from various ideologies as an 'interpretive framework' (Hochschild, 1979, p. 566) setting up the unique and diverse feeling guidelines in relation to different social situations, but also across different social groups. Alongside wider social institutions which perpetuate heteronormative values, the formal rules on digital platforms, and users, implicitly provide the 'framing rules' for the 'feeling rules' which direct *how* sexual and gender minorities feel about their identity when interacting on *different* platforms. Here, as the findings suggest, sexual and gender minorities are positioned as 'other', and, to different degrees, experience feeling of *shame* about their identity. There is some suggestion that stigma is experienced differently by different minorities; this relates closely to how normative 'framing rules' are constructed for different sexual and gender minorities, which is reflected in some of the findings we have already discussed. For example, it has been indicated kink is constructed as highly deviant, suggested in how they engage with different platforms; there is a tendency to avoid disclosing their sexuality on mainstream sites, instead kink practitioners favour using alternative platforms such as FetLife to talk openly about their identities. In contrast, it has been highlighted that trans and lgb communities acknowledge there is *some* level of acceptance on mainstream digital platforms amongst normative gender and sexual communities. However, it is important to note that trans and lgb communities still experience discrimination on these platforms (Buss et al., 2021; Kitzie, 2018; Reer et al., 2019), as well as experiencing significant persecution offline (Todd, 2020). As indicated earlier, kinksters sought feelings of 'tolerance', whereas trans and lgb participants sought feelings of 'acceptance'. Furthermore, although there is some suggestion participants internalised the deviant label, due to normative 'framing rules', there is evidence of unique 'framing rules' simultaneously occurring, emerging from each minority community, reinforcing, and supporting their identities. Moreover, the 'framing rules' associated with normative values conflict with the 'framing rules' which emerge from marginalised communities, creating a contradictory set of 'feeling rules'. Here, 'feeling rules' from marginalised communities challenge normative values, and encourage feelings of inclusion, security and empowerment amongst gender and sexual minorities.<sup>8</sup> Whilst 'feeling rules' within a community protect and encourage positive feelings and responses to sexual and gender identity, simultaneously, minorities are confronted with normative 'feeling rules' which encourage feelings of shame about their identities. This is evident in

the narratives relating to the use of pronouns. Reluctance amongst some of the trans participants to use pronouns is due to the fear of experiencing shame directed by other users; this conflicts with the values of the wider trans community and support networks, who encourage the use of pronouns universally. Hochschild's work highlights the significance of this paradox, acknowledging that when there is a case of

a lack of clarity about what the rule actually is, owing to conflicts and contradictions between contending sets of rules. Feelings and frames are deconventionalized, but not yet reconventionalized. We may, like the marginal man say, 'I don't know how I should feel' (p.568).

This has consequences for identity construction and for performances in the front regions. Here we suggest sexual and gender minorities divide up social worlds in response (Goffman, 1963); the latter was evident in the participants' use of multiple social media accounts on both mainstream and alternative platforms, and how personal information was filtered.

### 3.4 | What about the back region?

There is room to consider the role of the back region in the lives of sexual and gender minorities. As Goffman (1959) contends, the back region can take on many forms but remains adjacent to the front region. Here we suggest that the focus groups acted as a back region and provided space where participants could explore their front region performances on digital platforms reflexively. In line with this, Goffman states how the back region may serve to adjust performances, and more specifically 'costumes and other parts of personal front may be adjusted and scrutinized for flaws' and that 'here the performer can relax: he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character' (1959: 115). The adjustment of performance in this way highlights the reflexive possibilities of engaging with back regions. However, we turn to Hochschild's work to demonstrate that reflexive practices in these spaces may also involve people reflecting on feelings (and framing/feeling rules) and potentially engaging in emotion work. To encourage this reflexive engagement, the focus group provided 'cues' for the participants to talk about their experiences and consider feelings; this was particularly evident when discussing feelings of shame, and experiences of discrimination. Cues included the questions posed by the researchers and participants. It was the cues during participant interactions that were particularly significant, given they were based on shared experiences and provoked empathetic responses. Evidence of the success of cues in some of the participants' responses, included: '*That was interesting, because like Jane was saying*' (Steve FG1 when referring to photos); '*I understand it, what Ali was saying*' (Jane when referring to use of pronouns); '*I was just about to agree, I think all of the discrimination*' (Teresa responding to Andy in FG3 when he highlights where discrimination emerges from). The recognition of shared experience creates a more open space to reflect on front region performances, helping people to act reflexively, and adjust future interactions. Moreover, in discussing the shared experiences of feeling 'ashamed', 'feeling hurt', and even more positive examples, such as 'feeling of self-worth', we suggest that the back region provides a space to reflect on our front region performances by consulting and re-evaluating both feeling rules and the framing rules. However, understanding the extent to which such spaces provide opportunities for emotional reflexivity can only be evidenced through closely observing the front region and back region performances of social actors over time.

## 4 | CONCLUSION

This article argues that gender and sexual minorities utilise digital platforms for different reasons; with mainstream sites such as Facebook and Twitter providing a space to connect with friends, family, and marginalised communities. The sense of solidarity between different online users was particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic

given interaction in physical spaces was restricted; overall it was indicated that there was a strong sense of community amongst gender and sexual minorities online. The role of different digital platforms in facilitating identity work is clear, which suggests that online spaces are increasingly significant in shaping how we present ourselves to others, but also provide an important space to help navigate identity and cultivate a sense of self-awareness. Despite the positive role of digital platforms, barriers which impinge on the identity work of sexual and gender minorities are evident; here the experience or anticipation of user hostility was identified as a key challenge. This is evident from the stigmatisation of sexual and gender minorities, leading to feelings of shame amongst these individuals. In exploring the identity work of minorities, we have utilised Goffman's and Hochschild's work to draw attention to how online spaces provide opportunities for front region performances, vis-à-vis identity work, but argue that such performances are directed by conflicting sets of feeling and framing rules, which cause individuals to divide up their social worlds. Furthermore, in helping to evaluate performances, we suggest that the back region is valuable, enabling sexual and gender minorities to identify and explore their front region experiences, but also to consider how paradoxical sets of (feeling/framing/social) rules impinge on their presentations of self. Here the back region is an important space in which people can act reflexively in preparing for future front region performances.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the participants who took part in the research project underpinning the article, and the QR Strategic Priorities Fund (UKRI England) for providing financial support for the study.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

### ETHICAL DECLARATION

The research discussed in this article was granted institutional ethical approval, a condition which needed to be met prior to starting the study.

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### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This term is used by A\* and B\* to describe gender and sexuality identities which do not conform to heteronormative identities and ideals.
- <sup>2</sup> 'LGB' refers to Lesbian, Gay, and Bi. Trans is used as an umbrella term, describing 'people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth' (Stonewall, 2021).
- <sup>3</sup> Refers to the practice of fetish, which might include BDSM, as well as other practices.
- <sup>4</sup> The digital platforms included in this article were the most frequently mentioned by participants, however, other platforms were acknowledged during focus group discussions.
- <sup>5</sup> See Colosi and Lister (2019) for examples of exclusionary SNS policies.
- <sup>6</sup> Examples include Stonewall; Galop; LGBT Foundation; and Mermaids.
- <sup>7</sup> See Mark's previous account for an example of discrimination experienced by an individual from the kink community.
- <sup>8</sup> This is evident in the values of different formal and informal support networks representing minority groups, including Stonewall, LGBT Foundation, Backlash, amongst others

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**How to cite this article:** Colosi, R., Cowen, N., & Todd, M. (2023). Sexual and gender identity work on social media. *Sociology Compass*, e13073. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13073>