The Subtleties of Self-Presentation: A study of sensitive disclosure among sexual minority adolescents

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Disclosing sensitive information online, such as an LGBTQ+ identity or potentially stigmatized behavior, can be necessary for many reasons, especially for those who identify as LGBTQ+ and may rely on social platforms for meeting others and social support. At the same time, these disclosures can lead to harassment and stigmatization. Evidence suggests that today's social platforms provide many more options and opportunities for sensitive disclosure than are possible offline, but we lack a taxonomy of disclosure strategies. Drawing on Goffman's self-presentation framework, we examined two types of sensitive disclosure within the cisgender male adolescent gay, bisexual, and/or queer (GBQ) population: revealing one's GBQ identity on social media and revealing the use of an anti-HIV medication, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), on both social media and dating apps. We find that today's online environment, with its different affordances, provides new opportunities for disclosure, such as the use of associations, repeated over time. Participants had distinct ideas about what disclosures were normative and relevant to particular social platforms and audiences. Lastly, we discuss suggestions for how platform design might promote sensitive disclosure.

1 INTRODUCTION

Using social platforms presents a paradox. On the one hand, they can support identity exploration and community building that enable people, particularly those with marginalized identities, to connect with similar others and find social support [13, 20, 38, 53, 63, 79]. On the other hand, these same platforms can highlight and exacerbate differences and stigma, by rendering content, behavior, and identity visible to a large and sometimes unsupportive audience [18, 71, 86]. Indeed,

many people with marginalized identities are cautious about the information they reveal and deliberately manage aspects of their identities across the ecosystem of social platforms they use [3, 25, 34]. Much work on sensitive disclosure has focused on adult populations [3, 73, 84, 90] yet there is reason to believe that the experience of adolescents may be different, as age can both further marginalize them and exacerbate the risk of sensitive disclosure [21].

Coming out as LGBTQ+ online is one disclosure that people are typically cautious about. While coming out can be liberating and a form of social privilege [66], it can also be scary and stressful [4, 49, 75]. Scholars have shown that some LGBTQ+ people do not want to draw explicit attention to their LGBTQ+ identity, as this is only one element of their many-faceted identity [12]. Instead, some LGBTQ+ people prefer being out on their own terms, which might involve being out to some individuals, or out on certain platforms that they deem more LGBTQ+-friendly [17, 30]. Being LGBTQ+ is a potentially stigmatized identity, and thus individuals are often careful about how and to whom they reveal their LGBTQ+ identity and may be motivated to do so subtly.

An important distinction in sensitive disclosure, moreover, is between a stigmatized identity, and stigma symbols, or "signs which are especially effective in drawing attention to a debasing identity discrepancy" that "convey social information" [41]. One such stigma symbol would be the disclosure of one's pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) use. PrEP is a form of HIV prevention approved for adolescent use in 2018 [82]. On the one hand, PrEP is highly effective in reducing the spread of HIV through sex [1], but its use has been stigmatized by those who see it as a sign of possible promiscuity [27]. The use of this medication is not only a potential signal of underlying identity attributes, but also a sign that one could be sexually active.

In this paper, we examine the above disclosures among cisgender male gay, bisexual and/or queer (GBQ) adolescents. We examine both the disclosure of one's GBQ identity and the disclosure of one's pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) use to better understand sensitive disclosure for the GBQ adolescent population. This work was initially part of a funded research effort to better promote and support PrEP use for GBQ adolescents [11]. We focused on the GBQ population in part due to their relatively high HIV transmission rates [2], and thus wanted to learn about their attitudes toward and understanding of PrEP with an eye toward developing outreach programs. In analyzing the data, we also encountered important lessons about self-presentation and identity, which are the foundation for this paper. We acknowledge that the GBQ population does not encompass the full range of identities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella and the need for work which focuses on other vulnerable groups as well.

HCI research has increasingly focused on disclosures online [3, 6, 25, 89, 94] and particularly how marginalized communities, such as the LGBTQ+ community, navigate these disclosures. Sensitive disclosure is an important aspect of self-presentation, yet — despite much recent work that aims to update Goffman's classic framework for today's media environment [16, 23, 46, 94]— we do not have a good understanding of how people disclose these types of sensitive information. With this paper, we hope to contribute a taxonomy of strategies people draw on in the online environment when coming out, and a better understanding of the role of context and audience in disclosure decisions. In the next section, we discuss the frameworks which guide our paper, namely, self-presentation and self-disclosure, and then transition into the importance of affordances in these processes. We then ground our specific research questions by discussing associations, and the role of context and audience in disclosure decisions.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Self-Presentation and Self-Disclosure Online

Goffman's self-presentation framework [40] is commonly used to explain how people present aspects of their identity, and how they try to guide others' impressions of them. This framework, which stems from the symbolic interactionist tradition that describes how identifiable roles and identities are said to structure our everyday interactions with others [14, 64], relies on a dramaturgical metaphor to interpret how people disclose information about themselves and behave in the presence of others. In other words, people perform certain roles, which can then structure social interaction. Goffman [40] suggests people draw on aspects of the physical setting, their manner of expression, and their physical appearance in presenting themselves.

Self-presentation is a helpful framework when thinking about disclosing sensitive information. Self-presentation and self-disclosure are related, but not interchangeable, in that self-presentation often involves communicating in ways that create a desired representation of the self [76], whereas self-disclosure is what individuals reveal about themselves to others, which might include their thoughts, feelings, and experiences [22]. Disclosing information may be a part of people's self-presentation online in that people are motivated to disclose information in ways that align with how they want to present themselves [3, 12, 22, 48]. People are aware that their identity and/or behavior disclosures can signal or reveal information about them, which subsequently can shape others' impressions of them.

Adolescent disclosures have received less scholarly attention, though this population has long found ways to disclose sensitive information online. For example, Marwick and boyd [62] detailed how teenagers would post song lyrics to disclose feelings to particular "in the know" audiences. More recently, CSCW scholars have investigated how adolescents disclose sensitive sexual information. Hartikainen et al. [45] found that adolescents tend to be particularly susceptible to pressure from friends and romantic partners when sharing sexual information.

In general, the internet can be vital for adolescents learning about sexual health and other health-related information [5, 37, 44, 68]. For example, when Covid-19 vaccines first came out, there were widespread movements on social media to disclose one's vaccine status, and even post pictures of oneself getting vaccinated [47]. That study found that these selfies, coupled with positive captions and motivational hashtags, can be effective in reducing vaccine hesitancy and countering anti-vaccination rhetoric. Yet despite these movements, there are still concerns about how to disclose potentially stigmatizing information.

In this study, we investigate adolescents' disclosure of a stigmatized identity, namely one's GBQ identity, and a stigma symbol, one's pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) use. Adolescents tend to be cautious in revealing a stigmatized identity, such as when coming out, for fear of being stigmatized themselves [4, 49]. Using PrEP may also be a sensitive disclosure for young people because it implies sexual activity and may require an awkward conversation with parents and/or health care providers [10]. The use of PrEP has indeed been stigmatized amongst adults as they have been perceived as hypersexual or lacking the knowledge to use other HIV prevention techniques [27].

PrEP uptake and awareness among adolescents is low [58, 83], even though adolescents are disproportionately impacted by HIV [72]. One way of increasing PrEP awareness is through social media campaigns that try to increase PrEP knowledge and uptake [52]. On LGBTQ+ dating apps such as Grindr, users may mention their PrEP use on their profile, prompting other users to look

it up and find out what it is. Indeed, the use of dating apps can be a strong predictor of PrEP awareness for adolescents [58][1]. Yet even though sharing one's PrEP use on social platforms can spread awareness, reduce stigma, and facilitate open discussions about HIV prevention methods with potential partners [92], adolescents are hesitant to disclose they are taking PrEP [11].

Much scholarship has identified important distinctions between how self-presentation and self-disclosure play out in online versus in-person interactions [12, 16, 23, 46, 94]. Particularly important for our discussion of disclosing sensitive parts of one's identity are the affordances of the online environment. We define affordances as the "perceived technical properties" of a platform [25], which encompasses a person's imagined uses of a technology and its features [69]. Each platform has its own distinct set of affordances [23]. When disclosing information, people rely heavily on these affordances, and thus have different tools at their disposal when it comes to presenting themselves. Drawing on aspects of setting, appearance, and manner may look different online, and may vary between online platforms according to the available affordances. Association is one such affordance that is particularly important for people's disclosures, which we describe below.

2.2 Associations

DeVito et al. [23] presented a framework for self-presentation structured around affordances related to the self (or "persona"), other actors, and the audience. Particularly relevant here is what they call "content association", defined as "the ability to link content to one's persona". Prior research suggests that the visibility of these linkages, such as location check-ins, photo tags, hashtags, or other digital traces, are important to self-presentation [77] and affect others' impressions [9, 12, 32, 36, 42, 87, 91].

Linking content to one's persona need not necessarily be intentionally part of one's self-presentation. For example, Duguay [29] described group memberships, page "likes", events, and related cues as involuntary expressions "given off" [40], and thus not a deliberate act of self-presentation. In other cases, however, people may strategically link content to their identity. Some participants in Andalibi et al.'s [3] interview study of US women who experienced pregnancy loss, for example, strategically linked content, but did so more subtly than directly sharing. They instead liked and shared content that others had created about pregnancy loss. Indeed, being "less visible and identifiable to others" can be an advantage depending on a person's goal [80]

Birnholtz and Macapagal [12], in their study of how gay and bi adolescents self-present on Instagram, built on this by showing how the visibility of these associations can be leveraged as part of an identity performance. Klein et al. [50] define identity performance as the "purposeful expression (or suppression) of behaviors relevant to those norms conventionally associated with a salient social identity." Birnholtz and Macapagal's [12] participants presented their identity subtly over time to avoid being "perceived as too gay". The authors also expand on DeVito et al.'s [23] affordance framework, thinking specifically about how temporal affordances can help users of social platforms disclose sensitive information over time. In contrast to face-to-face interactions that are essentially ephemeral, online behavior may be viewed either as it happens, or in a sort of curated exhibition by viewing someone's profile, posts, and photos that have been aggregated over time [46, 94].

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[1] There is substantial evidence that people under age 18 use Grindr, even though it is a violation of Grindr's terms of service for them to do so [59].

We know that people adapt their behavior to the online environment [51], such as by using various affordances to aid their self-presentation [23]. We also know that people might want to subtly disclose sensitive information [3, 12, 30]. We do not have a good sense of how people use different types of associations offered on today's platforms, and what impacts decisions to do so. Our first research question is:

RQ1: How and why do participants use associations in the online environment to reveal their GBQ identity?

2.3 Context and Audience

While associations can help people disclose sensitive information, both context and audience play a role in the decision to disclose information at all. As Nissenbaum [70] has argued, a context is "a structured social setting characterized by canonical activities, roles, relationships, power structures, norms (or rules), and internal values (goals, ends, purposes)". A context often consists of particular roles, activities, norms, and values, yet a context can vary in how defined and ritualized those concepts are. Moreover, contexts may overlap and possibly conflict, such as when a person has friends who are simultaneously work colleagues [70].

People must often straddle multiple social contexts, and this is particularly true online. A user of mainstream social media platforms[2] like Instagram and Facebook must navigate differing norms for how people are expected to behave on these platforms, and varying ways these platforms might be used. On other online platforms, such as dating apps, the context is more clearly defined in that the majority of people on these apps are looking to build some sort of intimate relationship with another person on the app [31, 35, 88].

An important part of our understanding of context online is the audience a user imagines or expects. People tend to have specific audiences in mind when disclosing information, and imagine a targeted audience that is contextually dependent [25]. Zhang et al. [93] introduced the concept of a social media disclosure ecology and found that both perceived affordances and closeness to audience predict online disclosures. They found that their survey participants were more likely to disclose pandemic-related distress on platforms that have higher perceived anonymity, content persistence, and visibility control. We mostly know and understand who can see and perceive our behavior face-to-face, but the same is very often not true online [54, 55, 61]. This is in part due to platforms' algorithms, which govern whether, when, and how other people see information shared by a particular person [24, 33, 74]. Litt [54] described the "imagined audience" as a person's mental conceptualization of the people they think they are communicating with.

On mainstream social media platforms, audiences tend to be comprised of different social groups, such as a mix of family, friends, and school or work peers [62]. People often seek approval when they share on social platforms, so may self-censor based on concerns about what a person in their audience might think [56, 78, 85]. Indeed, Bazarova [6] found that the audience may interpret the intimacy and appropriateness of disclosures differently depending on the context, judging very intimate, public disclosures on Facebook as inappropriate. On LGBTQ+ dating apps such as Grindr, audiences tend to consist of others seeking hook-ups, dating, and friendships with those with a

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[2] In this paper, we define mainstream social media platforms as platforms that "allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system." [15]. We define dating apps as apps where users' main goal is a romantic or sexual relationship [31].

shared identity. In this context, it is often more normative to disclose more intimate information that may be relevant to the audience, such as HIV status [89].

People adapt their self-presentation practices so that they present in a desirable and appropriate way to their imagined audience [19]. The ability to do so effectively, however, depends critically on DeVito's et al. [23] affordance of "audience transparency", or the ways in which the platform makes people aware of who is in their audience. For example, setting one's Instagram to "private" can allow a person to have greater audience transparency in that they know their audience will consist only of their followers, rather than being potentially visible to any user of Instagram [28].

For sensitive disclosures, where the wrong audience can have disastrous results [26], the importance of context and audience are likely amplified. As such, it is vital to understand the ways in which context and audience impact decisions around different types of sensitive disclosure. We focus here on disclosure of a specific behavior – PrEP usage – that could carry stigma for adolescents that may not want to draw attention to their sexual activity. Indeed, prior work suggests many adolescents are comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation, but much more hesitant to disclose PrEP usage [11]. Thus, our second research question is:

RQ2a: How does platform context impact participants' rationales for disclosing their PrEP usage online?

RQ2b: How do audience, and participants' conceptualizations of audience response, impact participants' rationales about disclosing their PrEP usage online?

3 METHODS

We report on original analysis of data collected as part of a larger study of adolescents conducted in 2019 [11].

3.1 Participants

Participants included 215 adolescents in the United States, aged 15-18, assigned male at birth. Participants identified as White (*n*=155), Black (*n*=28), Asian (*n*=36), Native Hawaiian (*n*=12), American Indian (*n*=7), or other (*n*=7)[3]. The majority of participants (*n*=139) were only attracted to male-identifying individuals, with a minority (*n*=76) indicating some attraction to female-identifying individuals as well. Participants were recruited via paid advertisements on social media (Facebook and Instagram) or had responded to past ads for studies conducted by the authors for which they were ineligible. Given minimal risk and prior evidence that LGBTQ+ minors may hesitate to seek parental consent for research participation [57], our Institutional Review Board waived the parental consent requirement typical for studies involving minors.

3.2 Materials and Procedure

All participants completed a screener survey to ensure eligibility (15-18 years old, assigned male at birth, sexually attracted to male-identifying partners, able to read English at an eighth-grade level, and HIV status of negative or unknown). The screener survey also included photo-identification tasks to verify human participants. Once eligibility was confirmed through evaluation of the screener responses by the research term, eligible participants were emailed a customized link to complete the online survey. They were asked questions about their GBQ identity, their use of social media and dating apps, and their knowledge of and willingness to share information about PrEP.

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[3] Participants were able to select multiple race categories, which is why the total is higher than 215.

The survey items were iteratively developed by the research team based on earlier interview and survey studies in similar populations. The usage of social media and dating apps was not a requirement as we wanted to know participants attitudes toward disclosure, as opposed to their actual behavior. That said, we realized in analyzing the data that almost all participants do use social media and dating apps. Upon completion of the survey, participants received a US $25 Amazon gift card.

The questionnaire contained many items reported on in other work [10, 11, 59]. In this study we focus specifically on 5 open-ended items not reported on elsewhere (see Table 1). There was branching logic in the survey such that not all participants saw all of these items, depending on their responses to relevant prior items. The first two questions in Table 1 were only seen by participants (n=114) who answered 'Yes' to the question, "In your opinion, could somebody viewing all of your social media accounts tell that you have an LGBTQ+ identity?" Question 3 was seen by all participants (N=215 i.e. all participants). Question 4 was seen only by participants (n=67) who responded 'unlikely' or 'very unlikely' to "Imagine that you are using PrEP, and currently using a smartphone app for guys who like guys, if you aren't already. How likely would it be for you to say you're taking PrEP on your dating profile?" Question 5 was seen by participants (n=130) who responded 'likely' or 'very likely' to that same "Imagine..." question. Not all participants chose to answer all questions they saw, however, so we report the response rates in Table 1 using the number of participants who saw each item as the denominator for that item.

It is important to point out that the vast majority of participants in our study were not actually taking PrEP, so we were asking participants about *hypothetically* revealing their PrEP usage. Our survey was conducted within a year of when PrEP was approved for adolescents, and uptake was very low [58, 83], and thus PrEP use was not a requirement for participating in this study. To ensure that participants understood what PrEP is and to educate some participants, the questionnaire included basic information about PrEP.

Table 1. Open-Ended Questions

Questions	Response Rate[a]
Question 1: What about your social media accounts would make people think that you have an LGBTQ+ identity?	92%
Question 2: If you think there are differences between your social media accounts in how people perceive your sexual orientation, what are those differences? If there aren't any differences, or if you don't think people can tell you have an LGBTQ+ identity from your social media, please explain why.	81%
Question 3: If you wouldn't post about PrEP on any social media, why? Please be as detailed as you can.	70%
Question 4: Why are you unlikely to post about being on PrEP in your dating profile?	81%
Question 5: Why are you likely to post about being on PrEP in your dating profile?	95%

[a] Note that not all questions were seen by all participants, due to branching logic based on responses to relevant prior survey items. The denominator for each percentage reported here is the number of participants who saw each item and not the full sample. See text for details on which participants saw which items.

3.3 Analysis

Two of the authors and an undergraduate research assistant used a thematic analysis approach [65] – reading responses, discussing emerging themes, and grouping them thematically – to develop a coding scheme for the open-ended responses that is further described below. We combined top-down and bottom-up approaches in our analysis. Our thinking was clearly informed by work such as Goffman's [40] self-presentation framework and DeVito et al.'s [23] affordance framework, however the details of our codes emerged from our thematic analysis approach. The first author and research assistant individually coded all responses. They met weekly over a 10-week period to code the data. This began with a training phase on a subsample of responses until agreement was better than 80% for all categories, with frequent discussion of codes and to resolve any disagreements. Disagreements were resolved through discussion with each other, and another member of the research team. A second round of coding was conducted for the open-ended survey responses about participants' rationales for disclosing PrEP usage on dating apps. Our initial coding scheme was not granular enough to differentiate participant rationales, so we followed the same thematic analysis approach, and applied a secondary coding scheme to responses to this particular question. Again, the coders went through a subsample of responses until agreement was better than 80% for all categories.

Agreement was better than 90% for all responses after the training phase. Note that coding categories are discrete but not mutually exclusive. Percentages in Tables 4 and 5 in the findings section do not add up to 100% as a small number of items were coded into multiple categories. This number is reported in a footnote under each respective table.

3.4 Coding Schemes

For RQ1, responses were first coded as *explicit* or *implicit* disclosure and then the implicit category was further broken down into subcodes. Table 2 names and defines each code.

Table 2. Coding Scheme for RQ1

Coding Category	Definition
Explicit	Clear linguistic indicators of openly and directly associating with a GBQ identity such as using words like 'gay' or 'bi' in reference to themselves
Implicit	Belief that their profile gave enough information for a viewer to discern their identity, but did not directly say it. This was then broken down into the below 3 subcodes
Implicit Behavioral	Actions and manners that would suggest their identity to viewers/followers. This included exhibiting a stereotypically feminine appearance, or their overall profile having what some participants called a "gay vibe"
Implicit Affiliations	Sharing content related to the LGBTQ+ population more generally or associating with LGBTQ+-relevant accounts such as sharing posts related to LGBTQ+ rights, liking LGBTQ+-related pages, or following accounts such as "Best of Grindr"
Implicit Visual	Non-linguistic, visible symbols of an LGBTQ+ identity, such as a rainbow flag or rainbow emoji

For RQ2, about how context and audience impact participants' rationales for disclosing their PrEP usage, Table 3 names and defines each code. In coding responses to the question about why participants would share PrEP on dating apps, we coded the majority of responses (100 of the 123 responses) in the *perceived relevance* category. We wanted to further explore why so many participants felt this was a relevant disclosure. We thus recoded these. The subcategories are also included in Table 3. These codes are further explained, with examples provided, throughout the findings.

Table 3. Coding Scheme for RQ2

Coding Category	Definition
Norms of Social Media/Dating Apps	Behaviors perceived as standard or acceptable on particular platforms or types of platforms
Reputation	Fear or worry about the negative consequences of other people's perceptions of their behavior
Inadvertent Outing	Not wanting to be outed at all by their behaviors
Audience Management	Catering activity to a particular target audience on a platform such as not posting something due to concerns with family seeing it

Perceived Relevance	Behaviors that were deemed as suitable/applicable for that particular situation. This code was further broken down into the 4 subcodes below for the question about why participants would share PrEP on dating apps
Sexual Health Communication	Wanting to communicate their sexual health and/or healthy/safe behavior to others
Prosocial Behavior	Sharing PrEP use is the "right thing to do" and will benefit others/the community
Desire to Appear More Appealing	Advertising their use/support for PrEP will encourage others to want to reach out to them
Open Communication	Expectation that if one side discloses PrEP use, a more open communication channel opens (which sometimes includes the possibility that others will disclose in turn)

4 FINDINGS

4.1 RQ1: How and why do participants use associations in the online environment to reveal their GBQ identity?

RQ1 asked how and why participants drew on associations in the online environment to reveal their GBQ identity. We found that the majority (72%) of participants revealed their GBQ identity implicitly, meaning they did not directly express their sexual identity and instead believed that their profile gave enough information for a viewer to discern their identity (see Table 4). To do this, many drew on what we call *ambiguous associations*, which we define as the subtle aspects of appearance and manner which could signal GBQ identity. Specifically, they relied on 1) visual symbols (14% of participants), and 2) affiliations (27% of participants). Participants also drew on what we call *temporal associations*, which we define as the ways that the subtle aspects of appearance and manner were drawn on over time. Our coding category of *behavioral strategies* (31% of participants) captured some of the ways our participants drew on temporal associations which included the ways participants played into stereotypical gay behaviors over time, and/or made frequent, subtle posts that their audience could view in aggregate and likely deduce over time that the participant identified as GBQ. Both ambiguous and temporal associations were considered implicit.

In understanding why these strategies were used, it became clear that participants used associations to allow for multiple possible interpretations about why they were sharing something, and/or to connect with fellow members of the LGBTQ+ community but hide from potentially homophobic members of their audience. Moreover, participants drew on the "curated exhibition" aspect of social platforms in that they could reveal information over time, and not necessarily have an explicit coming out post if they didn't want one. These findings are further described below with examples from the data.

Table 4. Disclosure Strategy Examples

Disclosure Strategy	Count(%)[a] n=105	Example
Explicit	37 (35%)	I came out in one of my posts
Implicit behavioral	33 (31%)	I usually post about food and kpop, and take videos of my friends that are girls which really isn't things that 'straight' [people] do. I take different photos overall
Implicit affiliations	28 (27%)	Posts advocating for the community
Implicit visual	15 (14%)	I have the LGBT flag emoji in my bio on Instagram

[a] Percentages do not add up to 100% given a small number of items (n=17) were coded in multiple implicit categories e.g. someone could use both a visual strategy and an affiliation. Items that were coded as explicit could not also be coded as implicit.

4.1.1. Ambiguous Associations: Visual Symbols and Affiliations. Visual symbols were ambiguous because they subtly hinted at participants' identities but did not directly implicate them as GBQ. Visual imagery has been shown to be important in self-disclosure [60]. Participants used visual symbols such as posting pictures with/of the pride flag, rainbow emojis in social media bios, and/or having a pride filter (photo frames with rainbow colors for people to modify/decorate their profile picture). For example, one participant explained:

> Well, I did recently put the LGBTQ+ flag in my bio. This year has been extremely life-changing in terms of how I feel about my sexuality, and it was a spur of the moment type of thing. Sure, it's not exactly prominent or direct, but it's there and people can interpret it as they wish.

The "interpret it as they wish" highlights how the visual symbol can be ambiguous. The person could be seen as an LGBTQ+ ally, or as LGBTQ+ themselves.

Ambiguous associations were also useful in that they could signal a participant's identity to those with insider knowledge of the community but hide from potentially homophobic others. This is similar to what Marwick and boyd [62] have called "social steganography", or the ways in which people hide content in plain sight, aware that only certain people will understand its true meaning. Many participants spoke about this when discussing their use of affiliations such as following gay accounts, posting LGBTQ+ centered content, and/or liking LGBTQ+ pages on social media. In this way, ambiguous associations could have varying levels of visibility. A visual symbol like an LGBTQ+ flag in one's social media bio is arguably more visible than the people one follows on Instagram, in that it can be readily seen as part of the profile. For example, this participant affiliated with a GBQ identity by following famous gay accounts, knowing that many people would not pick up on this:

Just by looking at my social media 'posts' people would not be able to tell that I am gay. In other words, I am not broadcasting it. However, if someone was actively trying to find out they could easily look at the people that I am 'following' on Instagram and tell (I follow many famous and outspoken gay men). This way, I am protecting myself from the homophobic population who would most likely be ignorant of popular LGBT people. At the same time, other LGBTQ people will know that I am gay from mutual followers/following.

Similar to visual symbols, affiliations were also useful in that they allowed for multiple interpretations of a person's behavior as signaling either an ally or someone with an LGBTQ+ identity. We also saw this in the ways participants associated with LGBTQ+ culture. For example, advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights was a common way participants affiliated with the LGBTQ+ community, so as to signal their GBQ identity. This participant explained that he often "shares items identified with gay rights, gay artists, and LGBTQ+ culture." Another participant said he's "very vocal about queer rights." These actions subtly created associations between people and LGBTQ+ content, which were important for a person's identity performance.

4.1.2. Temporal Associations: Behavioral Strategies. Many participants reported it was their behavior over time that signaled their identity to others. This is an example of what we call *behavioral strategies*, which were used by 31% of participants. We found participants did this by 1) playing into what they deemed as stereotypical gay behaviors that produced an overall "vibe" from the aggregation of their behavior, and/or 2) making frequent, subtle posts that could add up to something greater.

Some participants thought others could discern their GBQ identity by observing repeated behaviors consistent with what participants felt were gay stereotypes, such as certain appearances and mannerisms. One participant explained he thought his "very artsy feed" fit "that gay stereotype." Another participant said: "I'm very feminine and that's a stereotype for being a gay man." Other participants thought simply being "jovial", having "blue hair", their "vocabulary", or their "poses in the photos" might signal their GBQ identity.

Many participants who used this strategy described cultivating an overall vibe or feeling through the aggregation of their behavior on a platform, which they thought would signal their GBQ identity. One indicated people could tell he was GBQ because of his "overall energy." Another participant said: "the way I talk in my posts and the things I talk about in the posts are mostly gay things." Some participants overtly mentioned the persistent nature of content displayed on their profile in assuming other people might form impressions based on their overall social media presence.

Secondly, participants felt that frequent subtle posts could add up to something greater. In other words, they reported that multiple ambiguous associations, taken together, would reveal their GBQ identity to their audience. For example, this participant described the various strategies he used: "I have a pride flag frame on my Facebook, I have a few pictures where I visited Stonewall memorial exhibit in NYC, or homosexual riot exhibit in Philly, a few gay celebs and other stuff. I've pinned a...gay news story." Another participant said the combination of a "rainbow profile picture and social justice related content" might reveal his identity.

4.2 RQ2a: How does platform context impact participants' rationales for disclosing their PrEP usage online?

While RQ1 focused on how GBQ adolescents were disclosing their identity, RQ2 concerned disclosure of PrEP usage, which might be seen as a stigma symbol. Revealing PrEP usage can be sensitive and possibly stigmatized because it signals both one's GBQ identity and a level of sexual activity that merits precautions like PrEP. RQ2a asked how the platform context impacted participants' rationales about disclosing their PrEP usage online.

Most participants didn't want to share their PrEP usage on mainstream social media platforms (See Table 5). Participants' main reason (44%) for not wanting to disclose was platform norms. They viewed this disclosure as 1) too private, and/or 2) out of place. The contexts that social media platforms straddled were not seen as contexts to discuss matters related to private health. One participant said, "This seems like a private medical decision to me. I just don't feel like it's anybody's business beside mine and any potential partners of mine."

Participants seemed to perceive what sorts of posts their audience expected to see and said they would not post this after concluding that a post about PrEP would be too out of the ordinary in these contexts. Participants indicated that sharing PrEP on social media "would be out of place" or "not really something I feel is 'share-able' or 'share-worthy'." As one participant said: "No *normal* person would share medication information online" (italics added for emphasis). Another participant said, "Not that I don't think PrEP is a good thing, I feel just like social media is for sharing life experiences, not medication." These participants made disclosure decisions based on their perceptions of platform norms.

In a separate context, however, namely dating, participants' attitudes toward disclosing PrEP usage differed. When we asked about sharing this on a dating app, 57% of all participants were open to doing so. Sharing on dating apps was seen as "relevant to the LGBTQ world" and in emphasizing that it is more normative, one participant said that "everyone else usually says it, it's customary." Yet it became clear that a fundamental part of context is how people think about their audience.

Table 5. Rationales for Not Wanting to Share PrEP Usage on Social Media

Rationales	Count(%)[a] n=151	Example
Norms of social media	66 (44%)	I feel like publicly posting that I'm on any "medication" isn't really what I see as the point of social media. I might text some of my friends about it, especially any guys that are gay or bi, but posting it for everyone just would seem odd to me
Perceived relevance	39 (26%)	I wouldn't post on any public social media because it wouldn't be relevant to my other friends
Reputation	27 (18%)	If I told people very openly I could well be considered a slut by acquaintances and [they might] think that I'm diseased

| Inadvertent outing | 21 (14%) | I don't want to risk me being gay getting out cause my parents are extremely homophobic and it would be really bad if they know I have intercourse with men |
| Audience management | 5 (3%) | I wouldn't post about it [PrEP] because family might follow me on there |

ᵃ Percentages do not add up to 100% given a small number of items (n=7) were coded in multiple categories.

4.3 RQ2b: How do audience, and participants' conceptualizations of audience response, impact participants' rationales about disclosing their PrEP usage online?

In answering RQ2b, we separately address audiences on social media and dating apps, as participants' responses revealed that these were perceived as distinct.

4.3.1. Audience on Social Media. On social media, while participants seemed to have some understanding of who they thought was in their audience, there was more uncertainty about who was actually seeing one's social media posts [24], which likely contributed to participants' ideas that their disclosure wouldn't be relevant. Participants (26%) shared that their audience wouldn't find the information "relevant", "wouldn't care", and that nobody "would find it interesting."

Along with a lack of audience transparency, or knowledge of who is seeing their posts, some participants shared ideas about how their audience would respond to this disclosure on social media. Participants' conceptualizations of their audience reflected worries that their audience would 1) not fully understand the disclosure/misinterpret the disclosure, 2) use it against them, and/or 3) form negative opinions of them. Participants had particular ideas of how they wanted their post to be interpreted but were aware their audience might understand their post differently or see it alongside other posts which might lead it to stand out. In other words, the content is being consumed in a context different from the one in which it is produced, leading to a contextual asymmetry, which could lead to misinterpretations [8]. For example, one participant, worrying about their audience misunderstanding their reasoning for this disclosure, said, "I'd be insecure to post that I'm on PrEP there because people don't know why." Other participants feared that people would think of them as "diseased", in that revealing PrEP might be mistakenly assumed to signal an HIV positive status. Another participant worried that PrEP disclosure might be used against him, "Because I fear the information would get twisted and somehow [bite] me in the butt."

Concerns were especially pronounced about one's personal reputation, and the possibility of negative impressions. They worried about being "judged", and people thinking they were "gross or weird." One participant said sharing their PrEP usage would affect his "good child" image. Another had specific friends and family in mind in saying: "Because some of my religious/homophobic friends and family would consider it weird."

Interestingly, a small number of participants (*n*=12) in their responses mentioned that they would share about PrEP on social media but, similar to revealing GBQ identity, they would do so using what we call ambiguous associations. One said that if they did share about PrEP on social media, they would not share directly about themselves: "I know that if I did a post about PrEP, it would be in the advocation of healthy living of LGBTQ+ people." Another participant said that sharing about *his* PrEP usage was not relevant or positive for his reputation, but that he would talk about PrEP "in an educational capacity." Having ways of creating ambiguous associations,

such as the ability to share general information, can be helpful in talking about sensitive information.

4.3.2. Audience on Dating Apps. To a more specific audience, such as on dating apps, participants had different expectations, as they assumed their profile to be seen by other people on the dating app who likely have similar goals such as to meet, hook-up, and/or date [67]. Moreover, the contextual asymmetry may be reduced on dating apps in that the context their audience is viewing their content is perhaps easier to imagine in that a person can assume their audience is seeing their profile amongst other potential dating profiles, most of which already share some level of intimate detail. This helps explain why many more participants were willing to share their PrEP usage on dating apps.

Participants anticipated positive audience response to disclosing PrEP use on dating apps. The majority of participants (64%) stated that this would signal their responsibility around sexual health (See Table 6). It would "display safety", show they are "protected and responsible", and demonstrate they "care about sexual health." A few participants also theorized that their audience might be more likely to reach out to them and disclosure could be "a conversation starter".

On dating apps, there were still some reputational concerns, but less about what friends and family would think, and more about what impressions other people on the app -- mostly strangers -- would form of their sexual activity. One participant said posting PrEP "make[s] you seem like a fuckboy or someone who's too active." Others worried people would assume they were "sleeping around."

Table 6. Rationales for Wanting to Share PrEP Usage on Dating Apps

Rationales	Count (%) n=100	Example
Sexual health communication	64 (64%)	Because it shows that I'm responsible about my sexual health
Prosocial behavior	19 (19%)	It is a must in my opinion, to let others know about your sexual health if you are on a dating app. People need to know how safe you are to yourself and others sexually
Desire to appear more appealing	9 (9%)	I believe it will increase my chances of landing a guy and it could be helpful
Open communication	8 (8%)	Why not, it's related to my sexuality and people who are gay will see my account and might find it in common with me so they could talk to me about it and give us a topic to expand on about

5 DISCUSSION

Disclosing sensitive information online can help build intimate relationships, shape identity, and develop supportive communities. Today's online environment provides new opportunities for disclosure. This study looked at two sensitive disclosures, one's GBQ identity, and PrEP usage.

We discuss our findings in light of our main takeaways: self-presentation as associations over time, and anticipating audience response in sensitive disclosures.

5.1 Self-Presentation as Associations, Over Time

We found that, for our participants, disclosing their GBQ identity online was an ongoing process in which they had specific goals for how and to whom they wanted to reveal their identity. When disclosing their identity online, they relied on various subtle social media strategies to meet those goals. Many of the strategies they relied on did not directly implicate them, but rather revealed information through ambiguous associations, such as using visual symbols and affiliations.

These ambiguous associations allowed for plausible deniability in the case of unsupportive audience members. A commonality across all associations was that they allowed for more flexibility in presenting identity, though these varied in the degree to which they were visible. Some associations were perceived as more hidden than others, such as following LGBTQ+ accounts or liking GBQ content, which is a point we return to in our design implications.

In the DeVito et al. [23] framework, the content association affordance is mainly considered to be about how other actors are impacting one's self-presentation. A core contribution of our study is how participants associate themselves with other people, content, and behavior. Ambiguous associations enabled participants to reveal their GBQ identity in ways that fit with their goals. Our participants were very much aware of these associations and strategically thought about their visibility, and what they could reveal to their audience. Here, we can draw from social psychology literature, specifically Klein et al. [50] who discuss that within identity performances, "the communicator expects the audience to recognize the association between the behavior and the relevant social identity." Participants assumed their audience, or at least parts of their audience, would recognize their associations and then assume their GBQ identity.

Temporal associations also emerged in our findings as participants drew on associations over time. We know that social media allows for identity performances that take place over a longer period of time [46, 94]. Birnholtz and Macapagal [12] suggest that adolescents adapt their self-presentation strategies to employ the temporal affordances of online platforms. Their participants drew on platform affordances to speed up or slow down the self-presentation process. We build on this by presenting different ways participants relied on their social media presence over time, namely, playing into gay stereotypes by cultivating a particular vibe, and/or using repeated ambiguous associations.

Participants were aware that their social media presence would likely be viewed in aggregate, and this became a fundamental part of their identity performance. This is a key difference from Goffman's [40] self-presentation framework in that while central concepts from Goffman's framework, such as manner and appearance, were both drawn on in creating associations, they were often cultivated over time. Exploring the ways in which temporal dynamics play into identity performances is an important avenue for future research.

Ultimately, we contribute a taxonomy of disclosure strategies (see Table 7), namely ambiguous and temporal associations, which relied on visual symbols, affiliations, and behavioral strategies. People tend to disclose sensitive information subtly, using associations, that are made over time. While additional research is needed to further validate these findings and also explore sensitive disclosure in the broader population, we believe our taxonomy of disclosure strategies could be a useful starting point for such research. While behavioral strategies are one type of temporal association, there may be other strategies as well that could emerge in future work. Other

strategies that we have not identified may surface in different populations and in different settings.

Table 7. Taxonomy of Disclosure Strategies

Implicit	Specific Strategy	Definition
Ambiguous Associations	Visual	Relies on sharing non-linguistic, visual symbols of sensitive identity
	Affiliations	Relies on sharing general content and/or liking or following accounts related to sensitive identity
Temporal Associations	Behavioral	Relies on exhibiting stereotypical behavior over time and/or using multiple ambiguous associations related to sensitive identity

5.2 Anticipating Audience Response in Sensitive Disclosures

While disclosing one's GBQ identity was generally considered normatively acceptable, there were still clear concerns about how to reveal this information, as detailed above. PrEP disclosure, on the other hand, was not normative to disclose, particularly to a more general audience on social media, and most participants said they would not disclose this information. Participants were actively thinking about the context for the information they disclose, and how this could align with their self-presentation goals.

There seemed to be a mismatch between how participants wanted others to view their disclosures, as opposed to how they thought they would actually be viewed. Birnholtz [8] points to this as a distinction between the contexts of production and consumption. While the context of production refers to the context in which a person produces a particular post, the context of consumption is, in part, the setting of a piece of content in relation to the other content shown around it. Birnholtz's [8] participants were not explicitly thinking about this contextual mismatch and were frustrated that their shirtless selfies were being sexualized by their audience in a way they had not intended. In our study, however, when thinking about the context of consumption, participants were not just thinking about what a typical post on that platform was, but also how the audience might see this information, and interpret the information differently to how they intended. They were acutely aware of how their audience might view their disclosure. Participants feared that their disclosures would be out of place and not seen as normative on their audience's feed, and also that their audience would not understand the post and potentially misconstrue it, use it against them, and/or form negative opinions of them based on the disclosure.

Thus, our participants anticipated an audience response to their disclosure, making them less likely to disclose on social media, where they thought the audience response would be negative, and more likely to disclose on dating apps, where the audience response would be positive. Indeed, on dating apps, they imagined their audience to view them as responsible about sexual health if they disclosed about PrEP. Participants were somewhat less concerned with *who* was in

their audience but more concerned with how their audience might interpret the disclosure. They made assumptions about their audience, how they would respond, and would shift their behavior to cater to those assumptions. In contrast to how we tend to treat the online environment, which is often too focused on audience members, we need to pay more attention to the few signals of context that are available. We found that participants were thinking about context as not just the social platform, but also what is normative to post on that platform and the expected audience response. These different signals combined helped to determine the setting for self-presentation.

Participants focus on their audience responses relates to Zhao's [94] discussion of how people are oriented toward future audience engagement. In this study, we started to see the development of various folk theories around audience response. Folk theories play an important role in the self-presentation process [24]. Future work could further build on how folk theories around audience response are impacting peoples' self-presentation, and particularly around their disclosure of sensitive information.

6 DESIGN IMPLICATIONS

Based on the above findings and discussion, we have two design implications to help platforms, particularly social media platforms, better design for the adolescent GBQ population and perhaps other marginalized populations: subtle associations with flexible visibility, and separate spaces, badges, and audience features. We make these recommendations while also acknowledging that the LGBTQ+ community is diverse and there are no one-size-fits-all solutions in designing for this population. Instead, we hope that platforms will center those most marginalized and design both for and with these groups to ensure flexibility for how people want to present themselves and disclose sensitive information.

6.1 Subtle Associations with Flexible Visibility

Regardless of the disclosure, whether GBQ identity or PrEP usage, participants wanted to share this information in ways that did not draw explicit attention. Instead, many participants preferred to associate with their community in ways that didn't directly implicate them such as in sharing informational and/or educational posts. In platform design, ambiguity can be a resource [39], and having more ways for people to subtly disclose sensitive information can be beneficial. Hardy and Lindtner [43] argue that queer subjectivity happens through the intersection of design decisions and use of technology. Design that doesn't force people to be explicit, but also makes it easy when people want to be will likely help LGBTQ+ people self-present in their desired ways.

Additionally, while our participants used ambiguous associations, these associations varied in their level of visibility. Too much visibility of information can lead to unwanted audiences seeing their information [26], yet at the same time, visibility can be used in people's identity performances, as they are aware that 'likes' or 'follows' can out them to some desired others. As Spears and Postmes [80] argue, visibility can be "double-edged and contradictory" in that sometimes this visibility is wanted, and other times it is not. Carrasco and Kerne [17] recommend that social media platforms obscure people's activities by default, and instead let people opt-in to what they want to share/what is visible.

We agree that allowing people to have more control over the visibility of these associations would provide more flexibility in presenting their identity online. We thus recommend that social media platforms provide ways for people to hide certain associations. For example, if an LGBTQ+ person is following a famous gay account and wants to see the content posted by this account, there should be a way for them to follow the account but hide the association in their follower

list. Thereby a person is still getting the benefit of seeing and learning from the content, but does not have to worry about what this association might indicate about their identity if they don't want to signal identity information. However, there is also a trade-off in that it could potentially further out those who opt not to hide their associations or those who don't know about this feature.

If all associations such as following/friend lists, likes/comments, and other such information defaults to being visible, it might restrict LGBTQ+ people from engaging with LGBTQ+ related content out of fears of what it could signal to others. In designing for LGBTQ+ people, it is vital to have flexible design features that give them more control over their identity performances, and thus ways of knowing what associations are visible, and choosing if they want them to be visible or not. This allows for greater control in how, and to whom they come out to.

6.2 Separate Spaces, Badges, and Audience Features

As indicated in the discussion, our participants were worried about disclosing PrEP given they thought their disclosure would be both out of place and not seen as normative on their audience's feed. One way of addressing this is to create alternative spaces that are more focused on sexual health. Our findings indicate that design changes alone would likely not be enough in promoting PrEP disclosures on social media. More campaigns would be needed to educate about what PrEP is and its utility.

That said, there are still potential design changes that could be helpful in normalizing discussions of sexual health on social media. One of the reasons that dating apps increase PrEP knowledge is because users have it in their profiles, meaning other users see this and then look it up/ask the user about it. While many users may not be comfortable sharing about PrEP usage on social media, one could imagine a feature that enables users who are comfortable to put a badge on their social media profile which indicates they are open to discussing sexual health. This badge could serve as a signal to other people that they could ask questions about sexual health. Stigma-free pledges have been effective in the past, especially in the context of HIV stigma [90]. The more people have pledges saying they are open to discussing sexual health, the more normative it could become. Profile features that allow for badges, profile filters, or other options that support social justice issues can spread on social media and become normative, such as when people changed their profile pictures to equal signs in support of gay marriage [81].

Moreover, self-presentation also includes concerns around misperception. Participants were concerned their audience would not understand their post and potentially misconstrue it, use it against them, or form negative opinions of them based on the disclosure. It would be helpful if social media platforms allowed for and made it easy for users to share posts to a selected audience. While Instagram has its "close friends" feature when sharing stories, a similar feature could be useful when making a post. People could then disclose sensitive information to more trusted friends and family and then, if they receive encouraging/positive responses, they may feel more comfortable changing the audience settings to allow more of their friends to see their post.

7 CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

Ultimately, in this study, we aimed to better understand the disclosure of sensitive information for an adolescent minority population. We contributed a taxonomy of strategies and detailed the role of platform and audience in disclosure decisions, emphasizing how anticipating audience response is an important element in one's decision to disclose. Moreover, we did not focus on a

single platform, but instead had participants think about their disclosures across platforms [93]. Our hope is that this paper spurs future research in the CSCW community on sensitive disclosure and the role it plays in the self-presentation process.

While we believe that our findings offer useful insights into self-presentation and sensitive disclosure, our limited sample size and population necessarily limit the generalizability of these findings. This was a survey study of GBQ adolescents in the US, so does not reflect the full range of identities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, or more broadly in the rest of the world. We acknowledge the immediate need for research on how other groups disclose their identity and think about revealing sensitive information in many contexts. Specifically, certain racial and sexual minorities, such as young Black LGBTQ+ people, have disproportionately high rates of HIV and low rates of PrEP uptake [92]. More research needs to be done on those most vulnerable to better identify ways of supporting them.

As our survey was conducted within months after PrEP became available to adolescent populations, our expectation based on known uptake rates was that an extremely small fraction would already be using PrEP when data were gathered [58, 83]. We therefore did not collect the number of participants in our sample who were on PrEP when data were gathered. We instead report on their hypothetical disclosure of PrEP, but hypothetical attitudes and actual behavior are not the same, limiting the claims we can make.

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