

# Navigating Online Selves: Social, Cultural, and Material Contexts of Social Media Use by Diasporic Gay Men

Social Media + Society  
October-December 2016: 1–10  
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/2056305116672485  
sms.sagepub.com  


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## Abstract

Social media not only create new opportunities but also pose new challenges for the ways people navigate their online selves. As noted by boyd, social media are characterized by unique dynamics such as collapsed contexts, implying that one's distinct offline social worlds meet online. This creates particular challenges for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people, at least those who find it crucial to maintain distinct contexts in which they disclose or conceal their gender and/or sexual selves. However, the existing scholarship on social media use by LGBTQs is predominantly anchored in English-language Western contexts and tends to lose sight of the cultural specificities of Internet use. Therefore, in this article, we build on the scholarship to further investigate the role of context for disclosing or concealing gender and/or sexual selves online. More specifically, we ask, "How do social, cultural, and material contexts affect the ways LGBTQs navigate their selves on social media?" To investigate this question, we analyze in-depth face-to-face interviews with gay men who themselves, or whose parents, migrated to Belgium. Because their migration background forces them to negotiate different social, cultural, and material contexts, our focus on diasporic gay men helps to bring out the issue of context in social media use.

## Keywords

social media, gay men, diaspora, collapsed context, Facebook, dating sites

## Introduction

The Internet has been widely acknowledged as an immensely advantageous medium for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people. Academics point out that the Internet "promises to free everyone, but especially queer youth, from the shackles of geography" (Barnhurst, 2007, p. 2) and thus "can literally be a lifesaver for many queer teens trapped in enemy territory" (Gross, 2005, p. 523). One aspect of the Internet that scholars point to as crucial for LGBTQs, besides its potential to transgress geographic boundaries, is the relatively strong sense of anonymity online, usually associated with such early textual platforms as bulletin boards, chat rooms, and multi-user dungeons (e.g., Driver, 2007; McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Munt, Bassett, & O'Riordan, 2002). While some researchers explore how this sense of anonymity enables people to play-act at being somebody else online (e.g., McRea, 1997; Turkle, 1995), the majority of LGBTQ Internet studies points out that such a strong sense of anonymity online translates into a greater authenticity of LGBTQ self-presentations. Gray (2009), for example, emphasizes "the increased

visibility of queer realness" on the Internet (p. 1182), and other authors show how the strong sense of anonymity online helps LGBTQs not only to explore (e.g., Szulc & Dhoest, 2013) but also to express their gender and/or sexual selves, to unmask "the covers they are forced to wear in their straight daily lives" (Nir, 1998 in Gross, 2005, p. 523).

So-called social media, which started to emerge in the late 1990s (van Dijck, 2013, p. 7), provide LGBTQs with quite a different environment for the online exploration and expression of their gender and/or sexual selves. Social media can be defined as web-based services that allow individuals to create profiles, articulate, and view the lists of connected users as well as interact with user-generated

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content (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211; Ellison & boyd, 2013, p. 158). The key change social media have brought about in regard to LGBTQs is the fading away of the strong sense of anonymity online, particularly on such widely popular and general social media as Facebook. Because on Facebook people often interact with those they also know offline (Baym, 2010), Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin (2008) categorize the platform as a “nonymous”—that is, the opposite of anonymous—online environment, where “people are more likely to present their selves as being in line with, or close to, normative expectations” (p. 1831). Consequently, on social media, LGBTQs once again face the dilemma about when, how, and to whom to disclose or conceal their gender and/or sexual selves. Some initial research on the topic indicates that the dilemma is even bigger on social media, especially on Facebook, than in the offline world because social media make it more difficult to maintain distinct social contexts (Cassidy, 2013; Cooper & Dzara, 2010; Duguay, 2016; Fox & Warber, 2015; Gudelunas, 2012).

However, the existing studies on the uses of social media by LGBTQs, similar to LGBTQ Internet studies in general (Szulc, 2014), are predominantly anchored in English-language Western contexts, most often in the United States (Cooper & Dzara, 2010; Fox & Warber, 2015; Gudelunas, 2012) and also in Australia (Cassidy, 2013) and the United Kingdom (Duguay, 2016). Goggin and McLelland (2009) alert us that when the majority of research in Internet studies is based on the same or quite similar contexts, it is easy to lose sight of the cultural specificities of the Internet. Similarly, in the inaugural issue of *Social Media + Society*, Gray (2015) reminds us that like other media, social media too are “tethered to the particularities of physical locations, material contingencies, and the passing of time” (p. 2). Therefore, in this article, we build on the existing scholarship on social media use by LGBTQs to further investigate the role of context for disclosing or concealing gender and/or sexual selves online. More specifically, we ask, “How do social, cultural, and material contexts affect the ways LGBTQs navigate their selves on social media?”

We will offer some initial answers to this question by analyzing social media uses of gay men with a migration background living in Belgium. Because their migration background forces them to negotiate different social, cultural, and material contexts, our focus on diasporic gay men helps to bring out the issue of context in social media use. First, we review the existing literature on social media use by LGBTQs and discuss practices of disclosure or concealment of gender and/or sexual selves, especially on Facebook. Second, we describe our methods of analysis and introduce basic information about our participants. Third, in the two following parts, we present our research results, which concern the participants’ uses of (1) Facebook and (2) chat and dating sites/apps, respectively. Finally, we formulate our conclusions and point out broader implications of our research.

## LGBTQs and Self-Disclosure on Social Media

As already mentioned, such widely popular and general social media as Facebook do not afford LGBTQs the anonymity associated with some early textual Internet platforms (Zhao et al., 2008). Moreover, boyd (2011) points out that social media augment the collapse of social contexts, which makes social media a particularly tricky environment for LGBTQs, at least for those who find it crucial to maintain distinct contexts in which they disclose or conceal their gender and/or sexual selves. Analyzing Facebook uses of LGBTQ students in the United Kingdom, Duguay (2016) makes a distinction between context collusions and context collisions (originally proposed by Davis & Jurgenson, 2014), the former being intentional and the latter unintentional. The author points out that while some LGBTQs take advantage of context collapse on Facebook, for example, using the platform to come out across multiple audiences, others find it problematic since they prefer to disclose their gender and/or sexual selves only to a limited number (or none) of their Facebook friends. Therefore, some LGBTQs employ different strategies for preventing context collisions on Facebook. For example, as Duguay (2016) shows, LGBTQs may tailor their online performances so that some publicly visible messages are only understood by certain audiences or separate audiences by using Facebook privacy settings or by restricting access to their network to specific groups of people.

In a similar study, Fox and Warber (2015) focus on the factors contributing to the disclosure or concealment of gender and/or sexual selves on Facebook. The results of their interviews with a cross section of US-based LGBTQs indicate that the main factor at play here is the degree of outness to one’s social network. Therefore, the authors propose to make a distinction between social media uses of LGBTQs who are (1) mostly in the closet, (2) peeking out (testing the waters for coming out to a wider audience), (3) partially out (out only to certain audiences), and (4) out. Additionally, they point to a number of other relevant factors such as the presence of conservative family or friends in the network, religion (here specifically the variations of Christianity which the research participants described as “fundamentalist” or “very conservative”), and professional concerns. Finally, briefly mentioning unique problems with context collisions for two participants whose families live outside the United States, Fox and Warber (2015) indicate cultural norms as yet another factor contributing to the disclosure or concealment of gender and/or sexual selves on Facebook.

While the two articles discussed so far focus primarily on Facebook, they also consider some other social media, to the extent that these were brought up by the research participants to contrast Facebook with other platforms. Interestingly, both Duguay (2016, pp. 902–903) and Fox and Warber (2015, pp. 89–90) point out that some LGBTQs, especially young ones, who prefer to conceal their gender and/or sexual

selves on Facebook, do explore and express them on Twitter or Tumblr. These interviewees consider these social media as more anonymous, and thus more secure and supportive platforms than Facebook. Additionally, some participants in Duguay's (2016, p. 902) research consider Twitter as "purely for thought," and thus particularly suitable for following and making political statements related to LGBTQ issues, while they find Tumblr the most anonymous out of these three social media, and therefore particularly useful for the exploration and expression of less socially accepted sexualities such as asexuality and pansexuality.

Other research which compares LGBTQs' use of Facebook and dating sites or apps also confirms that Facebook tends to be perceived as the most public and the least anonymous social medium (Gudelunas, 2012; Light, 2014). Strictly speaking, dating sites and apps are not social media according to popular definitions of the latter (e.g., boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211; Ellison & boyd, 2013, p. 158). Yet, we decided to include them in our discussion because dating sites and apps may indeed be considered as social media by their users (Light, 2014, p. 14), and they play a prominent role in the Internet use of many LGBTQs. In his study of the uses and gratifications of social media by US-based gay and bisexual men, Gudelunas (2012, p. 361) points out that the participants tend to conceal their sexual selves more often on such general social media as Facebook than on dating sites or apps. Light (2014) finds similar tendencies among the participants in his research with people residing in the north of England. As one of them explains, "[. . .] the Facebook site is anybody and everybody, whereas that one [Gaydar, a gay dating site and app] isn't, it's more of a discreet line out, I suppose, it's kind of a lifestyle things rather than an everywhere social thing" (Light, 2014, p. 73).

However, even though LGBTQs tend to be more open about their gender and/or sexual selves on Twitter, Tumblr, and dating sites/apps than on Facebook, this does not mean that they always clearly identify themselves on those more anonymous platforms. In the abovementioned research by Gudelunas (2012), "Respondents appreciated having control over when and under what circumstances they would reveal identifiable characteristics" (p. 362), also on dating sites/apps. For example, one participant reports only to reveal his face picture on Grindr, a popular gay dating app, when he travels. Similarly, studying the uses of Grindr in urban and rural or isolated areas of the United States, Blackwell et al. (2015) note that many of the app's users do engage in what they call "identity-masking strategies" (p. 1130), most often by concealing their face pictures and also by blocking other users by whom they do not want to be recognized. The authors explain that Grindr users concealing their identity on the app usually fear negative consequences from being perceived not only as gay but also as a "slut" since the app, as well as many other (gay) dating apps, is often associated with seeking casual sex (see also Cassidy, 2015; Mowlabocus, 2010). Importantly, the participants located in

rural or isolated areas, more often than those living in a big city, reported concealing their identities on Grindr.

## Methodology

Our research is based on in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews, in line with many other studies in this field (e.g., Duguay, 2016; Fox & Warber, 2015). This method allows to discuss a pre-determined list of topics while remaining open to alternative issues the participants may want to discuss (Bryman, 2012). The topic list was based on a preparatory literature review as well as 12 expert interviews with people working for ethnic-minority LGBTQ associations in Belgium. The interviews were divided into two parts: the first exploring ethno-cultural roots and connections, sexual identifications, and coming out, and the second dealing with uses of mass and digital media, with a particular focus on social media.

The sample for this research was based on an open call for participation to any LGBTQ of non-Western European origin living in Belgium. A variety of means was used to promote the research, most prominently the Facebook pages of LGBTQ associations, including—but not limited to—those oriented toward ethno-cultural minority LGBTQs. While all these calls were oriented toward people of diverse gender identifications, a research profile was also set up on the gay male dating site GayRomeo, where people viewing the profile were invited to participate in the research. In total, 35 people were interviewed, 5 of whom were found through GayRomeo. They were a varied group, including men (29) and women (6) with roots all over the world. To focus our analysis, in this article we will concentrate on two particular sub-groups of gay-identifying male participants.<sup>1</sup>

A first group is constituted of eight "second-generation" participants, born in Belgium from parents born abroad (in Northern Africa, the Middle East, and Asia).<sup>2</sup> While there are important cultural differences within this group, there are also strong parallels in their familial migration background and current social context. All of their parents migrated in the 1960s or 1970s, and all these participants describe how they are currently surrounded by their families as well as tight and quite conservative ethno-cultural communities in Belgium, which exude a strong degree of social control. These participants have a clear legal status, as they have the Belgian nationality, and they were born in Belgium, speak the language, and work there. At the same time, they also have a strong ethno-cultural social network in Belgium as well as strong connections to their parents' country of origin. All participants in this group struggle to express their homosexuality, which they suggest is at odds with the values of their ethno-cultural community surrounding them.

A second group is what we would call "sexual refugees," nine men who (felt they) had to escape their country of origin because of their sexual orientation. They mostly come from countries where same-sex sexual practices are criminalized

'or persecuted' (in Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Russia), and all felt they could not live their sexuality freely there. Despite their diverse national, ethno-cultural, and religious backgrounds, these participants share similar experiences of sexual oppression in their home countries, and they occupy a similar position in Belgium: all moved away from their home country and family, traveling individually, and keeping a distance from their ethno-cultural community in Belgium. Contrary to the second-generation participants, members of this group struggle to find a space in Belgian society, be it in terms of legal status (most seeking or having obtained asylum), employment and financial means (many having a hard time finding a job), language (most struggling to learn Dutch, the language of their current place of residence), or social life (most having very limited contact with their ethno-cultural community in Belgium). However, compared to the second-generation participants, they feel freer to explore and express their sexual selves, at least in Belgium where they created a safe distance from their generally conservative ethno-cultural communities.

It is interesting to compare these two groups because they are similar in many respects (e.g., in terms of gender, sexual identification, and age, both groups containing gay men in their 20s and 30s), while they differ in a number of others, as discussed above. Most relevant here is the fact that both groups negotiate different social and cultural contexts, but while the second-generation participants are geographically close to their relatives and ethno-cultural community in Belgium, the sexual refugees created a geographic distance between themselves and their families and home cultures.

In this context, it is worth pointing out that Belgium is one of the most liberal countries world-wide in relation to LGBTQ rights (Borghs & Eeckhout, 2009). While it is important to avoid the homonationalist trap of presenting Belgium (as part of Western Europe) as a safe haven for LGBTQs while presenting other cultures (including non-Western migrants in Belgium) as homophobic (Mepschen & Duyvendak, 2012), we cannot ignore the fact that all our interviewees set up a distinction between the acceptance of LGBTQs they experienced in Belgian society at large and the high degree of intolerance they faced in their ethno-cultural community in Belgium and/or the persecution and criminalization they faced in their home country.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and explored using the qualitative analysis software NVivo. In this article, we focus on Facebook, the prime social medium among all participants, but we also shortly discuss their uses of chat and dating sites and apps. For each group, a limited number of participants is discussed in depth in short "vignettes," illustrating the range of social media uses as connected to their everyday social, cultural, and material contexts. Then, in a comparative discussion, we try to come to a more general understanding of the interplay between different contexts and social media uses.

Before we proceed, a note on ethics. With such a vulnerable group, for whom confidentiality is so important, gaining and respecting trust were key issues throughout the research process. At the start, we obtained informed consent and ascertained anonymity; after the initial analysis of the interviews, the participants received a general report including their quotes, to which they could comment. All were satisfied with the way their data were treated and the degree of anonymity. In this article, their names are replaced by other names which are commonly used in their country of origin. To further protect their identity, only an approximation of their age is given, and their country of origin is replaced by a broad regional indicator.

## Facebook

Upon first look, our analysis of the interviews discloses a number of strong similarities. For all participants, the Internet is of key importance as a relatively cheap, low-threshold way to find information and to establish connections across geographic and social boundaries. Echoing the literature discussed above (Driver, 2007; McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Munt et al., 2002; Szulc & Dhoest, 2013), many participants comment on the advantages of the Internet as a discreet, (if need be) anonymous way to explore their sexual selves in often discriminatory or outright hostile environments. At the same time, the less anonymous Facebook occupies a key position in most participants' current media uses, offering a way to connect to family, straight friends, as well as other LGBTQ individuals and associations. However, there are a number of variations between both groups as well as within them, which will be discussed below.

## Second-Generation Participants

A first thing to note is that all second-generation participants have a Facebook profile, which they use to different extents and with varying degrees of candor about their sexual orientation.

Some participants are rather concerned about anonymity. *Mehdi*, a twenty-something public figure with roots in Northern Africa, is most worried about context collapse. He uses Facebook privately, socially, and professionally as a way of self-promotion. Because of his public status he is somewhat of a role model to members of his family, and he is Facebook friends with many cousins in his parents' home country. He actively tries to prevent context collisions by separating audiences, as discussed by Duguay (2016). In particular, he made a list of gay acquaintances (people he knows from the gay scene) who cannot see, like, or comment on his private pictures: "I have a list of pictures related to work and everybody can see those."<sup>3</sup> When asked whether he follows gay-related groups and associations on Facebook, he answers, "No, because I sometimes think: if I like them, a cousin of mine could see it." For the same reasons, he



changed his privacy settings so that people cannot tag him in pictures. Clearly, Mehdi worries about context collisions on Facebook, which is interesting as he is rather publicly out in Belgium, having made appearances on national television to testify about his homosexuality. However, Facebook transgresses these national boundaries, connecting him with relatives and acquaintances in his parents' home country who may not know about his sexual orientation.

*Fatih*, a twenty-something participant with Middle-Eastern roots, uses Facebook in a similar way. He is active in politics, which makes him a visible representative of his rather conservative ethno-cultural community in Belgium and dependent on their votes to further build up his political career. Moreover, at the time of the interview he was unemployed, hence economically dependent on his family members, for many of whom sexuality was a taboo. While he is out to his parents and close friends, he is not out to his extended family and the broader ethno-cultural community. As a consequence, he prefers to keep his Facebook profile neutral:

Fatih: I use Facebook regularly to often, because I also have the profile for my mandate.

Q: How does that work, do you have a separate profile for your mandate?

Fatih: No, I have one profile, but that's rather discreet I would say, it's rather neutral.

He does allow his different social spheres to meet virtually on his profile:

Fatih: Almost everything is there. There's gays, if I want to have a chat with them. My family's also there, my private life is there, my voters are there . . .

Q: Is that not hard, at times, if you post something or other people post something on your profile?

Fatih: My friends know they should never check me in for certain things. They can tag me, but not in D Club (a gay club) or something like that. But that hasn't happened so far, my friends know that.

So while *Fatih* does not use Facebook privacy settings to prevent tags, as discussed by Duguay (2016), he does prevent context collisions by imposing informal rules on his gay friends. In the categories used by Fox and Warber (2015), like Mehdi he is "partially out" and they both use some of the strategies mentioned by these authors to manage micro contexts: categorizing friends and using privacy settings.

*Amir*, a participant of North-African descent who is in his 30s, rather fits in Fox and Warber's category of "peeking out." Like Mehdi, Amir is employed, hence economically self-dependent, but he does remain socially attached to his ethno-cultural and religious (Muslim) community and is not broadly out, only to some colleagues and friends. As a consequence, he is rather cautious on Facebook, not disclosing

his sexual orientation explicitly but discreetly signaling it through his connections to certain people and by liking certain pages and associations. Like *Fatih* and Mehdi, he mixes the social with the professional on Facebook, and while he admits to having made a separate profile only for his close (often gay) friends in the past, he claims not to use it anymore. Increasingly, he becomes friends with gay people on his main profile, and he likes LGBTQ associations and bars:

Q: So you don't censor yourself?

Amir: No. In my job I get in touch with all kinds of people, and people just have to accept it, without trying to find out: is he that way [gay] or not.

For Amir, the gradual process of more candid self-disclosure on Facebook is part of his coming out process, becoming increasingly unapologetic about his sexual orientation. While many of his friends and relatives do know about his homosexuality, his mother does not and he says it remains something one does not talk about within his ethno-cultural community in Belgium.

Contrary to those discussed above, other second-generation participants are not that concerned about context collisions on Facebook. For instance, *Jalil*, who is in his 30s and has a background in a conservative North-African Muslim community, is out to everybody, and as a consequence, Facebook is a place where all his social spheres connect without restrictions. When asked what he uses Facebook for, he says, "A bit of everything together, both social, private and professional, and to find information." He does not worry about these worlds overlapping, and as an activist he unabashedly follows LGBTQ groups and associations. On one hand, he can do this as he is employed, hence economically self-dependent. On the other hand, however, this liberty comes at a price: after coming out, he was physically threatened by his father, kicked out of the family home, and he has only very limited contact with his family and ethno-cultural community. So Facebook, to him, is not a way to connect with his ethno-cultural community, which also takes away the need to self-censor.

Like *Jalil*, there are two other participants (of Chinese origin) who are completely out to their family and on Facebook, but as a consequence they have a rather complicated relationship with their family. Like for the second-generation participants discussed above, their families and communities use religion to condemn their sexual orientation, but rather than Islam it's Buddhism and Taoism, respectively, which question the discursive opposition between Muslims and LGBTQs as it is persistently set up in Europe (El-Tayeb, 2011). Two others, of Middle-Eastern and North-African origin, are partially out but do maintain connections with their families and ethno-cultural communities; as a consequence, they are more cautious in disclosing their sexual selves online.

Reviewing the Facebook uses by second-generation participants, we observe a range of strategies to deal with

context collapse, strongly connected to their degree of being out (in line with Fox and Warber, 2015) but mediated by a number of other contexts, in particular economic and social dependence on relatives or members from their ethno-cultural community who live in geographic proximity. Hence, social, cultural, and material realities are of key importance in understanding their social media uses.

### Sexual Refugees

The sexual refugees traveled to Belgium as individuals, so they do not have their families with them and they keep a distance from their ethno-cultural communities in Belgium because of the homophobic attitudes within them. As a consequence, one could expect those participants to feel freer to express their sexuality on Facebook. However, as already observed above in relation to second-generation participants, social media transgress geographic boundaries, and consequently, the sexual refugees present a similar range of degrees and strategies of disclosure or concealment of their sexual selves on Facebook.

Some participants are quite unrestrained in their current Facebook use. *Peter*, a recognized refugee from Sub-Saharan Africa who is in his 20s, considers Facebook as his connection to the world: "I'm on my Facebook 24 hours, yeah. I'm on my Facebook, and every little thing that happens, immediately I get it in a few seconds." It is a place where all his social worlds are allowed to come together, including his (gay) friends and his activism. He is completely out, not only in Belgium but also in his country of origin, which he had to leave because of his homosexuality: "I was in serious trouble with government." In Belgium, he is quite secure now as a recognized refugee with a job and a boyfriend:

For me, I moved because I knew there is a place like this for me, there's a place I can be able to live free as a gay person. I never lived with a man all my life, but this is the first time I'm starting to do it and I really feel happy, I feel like: ah, I think my dream is coming true.

While Peter feels comfortable disclosing his sexuality on Facebook now, back in his home country it was risky:

If you like a particular group, a lot of people see that you like it. People want to try to see what you like. It could be positive, it could be negative, but people would be able to see what you like.

Liking activist and gay groups on Facebook was dangerous, as was browsing gay-related websites which mostly had to be done in public cyber cafes: "You have to watch out what you are trying to do there. Otherwise, if people see you, oh my god! It's another thing, you could be beaten instantly from there. Just accessing it, you know." While he is completely out in Belgium, the situation he describes in his home country corresponds to the degree of outness that Fox

and Warber (2015) call "mostly in the closet," with the concomitant fears of unintentional outing through social media. Like Peter, two other activist sexual refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa who obtained asylum in Belgium contrast the problems they faced in their home country with their current state of complete outness, both on Facebook and in everyday life.

Most sexual refugees, however, feel less at ease on social media, reflecting their more limited degree of outness as well as their more limited sense of security. For instance, *Maga*, a participant in his 30s from Russia, has also been granted refugee status, but he does not feel secure to disclose his homosexuality, neither to his family (with the exception of his sister) nor to compatriots living in Russia or Belgium. Coming from a strongly religious (Muslim) background, he fears physical threats which seem justified as a gay friend from his home country has been severely harassed by compatriots in Belgium. As a consequence, he carefully keeps his gay and straight life apart online, which led him to create two different Facebook accounts: "I have two profiles, one is gay, the other is regular, that's where my family is." He created them using different browsers (Internet Explorer and Google Chrome) to avoid automatic links between the profiles and other applications: "So the one I always use is on Chrome, there I have the gays. The other one is for Messenger, for my mother. But my sister is on my gay profile." Discussing the use of these profiles, it becomes clear that they mostly serve to keep social worlds apart. One is for the family and for his colleagues, the other for his gay friends:

Q: Do you use them differently?

Maga: The same. The same pictures, . . .

Q: So you post them twice?

Maga: Yeah, "been there," "done that."

Q: But sometimes it's different pictures?

Maga: Yeah, the ones that are really . . . gay stuff.

Interestingly, then, the content of both profiles is rather similar (with the exception of the explicitly gay material), their main function being to avoid context collisions.

*Ahmed*, a man in his early 30s from Northern Africa, is more dependent socially on his ethno-cultural community in Belgium than Maga, who is socially and economically self-dependent. Contrary to the sexual refugees discussed above, Ahmed has no official legal status in Belgium as he traveled there on a student visa and did not return, and he has ample contact with people from his ethno-cultural community in Belgium. However, he is not out to them, which led him to also create two separate Facebook accounts: "I have two Facebook accounts, one for my family and one to . . . relax." In the interview, as in everyday life, he is reluctant to discuss his sexual orientation. Not coincidentally, he contacted us using GayRomeo, which for him and most other interviewees operates as a more compartmentalized space to explore one's sexuality. Of all the participants discussed so far, he

most clearly lives a “double life,” his homosexuality being relegated to very particular and separate contexts.

*Hassan*, another North-African participant in his 30s, most clearly illustrates our observation that the participants’ social media use is dependent not only on their degree of outness and sense of safety but also on their socio-economic position. Not only does he not have a legal status in Belgium (like Ahmed), but he also lacks sufficient income as well as a social network. He got in touch with us through an association for male sex workers, as an undocumented migrant doing sex work and not having a stable income nor a domicile in Belgium. Because of that, he had no home access to the Internet, nor did he have a smartphone, only using his phone and text messages to get in touch with men. He was multiply disadvantaged, not only lacking the financial capital to participate on social media but also the educational and linguistic capital, only speaking (broken) French besides his mother tongue. More than any other participant, Hassan put things in perspective: in order to use social media in the first place, one needs a level of financial, educational, and linguistic capital that many refugees and undocumented migrants actually lack. Moreover, one needs to feel physically safe from homophobic attacks.

While we have no space here to discuss them in depth, some other sexual refugees illustrate this as well. For instance, at the time of the interview, Moustapha, an asylum seeker from Sub-Saharan Africa, was living in shared social housing, and he only had access to Internet on a shared computer in the living room. As he was not ready to disclose his sexual orientation to the other asylum seekers in the house, he could not use the computer to visit gay-related websites or Facebook, which he uses mostly to contact his gay friends. As he hadn’t obtained a residence permit yet and could be sent back to his home country, he was scared that compatriots (both in his home country and in Belgium) would discover his homosexuality, so he only used Facebook in a very limited and cautious way, adopting a false name and using an unrecognizable profile picture.<sup>4</sup>

Reviewing the interviews with sexual refugees, a first thing to note is that the geographic distance from the country of origin does not take away all fears for context collapse, partly because Facebook crosses national boundaries but also because people from the home country living in Belgium could report back to the country of origin, where for most of the interviewees homosexuality (or same-sex sexual acts) is a crime or at least strongly condemned. Second, more so than among the second-generation participants, the importance of material factors as well as educational and financial capital becomes clear for sexual refugees, as some participants have no or only limited access to Facebook, or lack the linguistic skills to use it extensively.

## Chat and Dating Sites/Apps

Facebook was not the only widely known and used social media across the sample; so were gay chat and dating sites

and apps. Here, the focus of the interview was not on one particular site or app, although GayRomeo and Grindr were often used as examples by the interviewer if they weren’t spontaneously mentioned by the interviewee. Chat and dating sites/apps were only discussed if and to the degree that participants felt comfortable to do so, so the interview material here is much more limited and general. However, it does offer an interesting point of comparison with the interview material on Facebook because issues of context collapse are less prominent and because anonymity is easier to accomplish here (Gudelunas, 2012; Light, 2014).

All participants say they used gay chat and dating sites/apps a lot in the past, as these provided a relatively safe way to explore their sexuality in a homophobic national or cultural context. Particularly for the younger participants, such platforms offered the first introduction to gay culture, where they chatted before meeting men offline. Like their Facebook uses, the participants’ uses of chat and dating sites/apps were strongly dependent on their offline contexts, in this case less their degree of outness but mostly their sense of safety and security, as well as material and financial conditions.

## Second-Generation Participants

For most second-generation participants, chat and dating sites/apps had a similar function when they were growing up: they offered a discreet way to explore their sexual selves, before they came out to anybody, unguarded by family or members from the ethno-cultural community and generally unthreatened by context collapse or unwanted disclosure. For instance, Mehdi, the twenty-something participant with North-African roots, started chatting as a teenager and it was his first contact with gay men. Fatih, the twenty-something participant with Middle-Eastern roots, also explored his sexuality using gay chat sites, which led him to his first boyfriend. Amir, the North-African participant in his 30s, also explored his sexual self (at a later age, in his 20s) using the Internet, but he says chatting wasn’t his thing: “I prefer to go out, meet somebody, even it’s for a one night stand. [ . . . ] I did that for a while, but after a while I got bored.” At the same time, he mentions the advantage of anonymity, which made it easier and safer to get in touch with people when he was still entirely in the closet: “To go out then and to stay somewhere all night, of course you had the chance to be seen.” Jalil, the other North-African participant in his 30s, similarly started exploring his sexuality as a teenager on a chat site. While he is completely out now, as a teenager it was the first way for him to get in touch with gay men.

For all the second-generation participants discussed above, chat and dating sites/apps were important in the process of self-exploration, in part because they all had relatively easy private access to the Internet in their teens or early 20s. However, some older participants (not discussed here) did not have such early or private access to the Internet,

so chat and dating sites/apps did not play an important role for them.

### *Sexual Refugees*

Like for the older second-generation participants, for the sexual refugees home or mobile access to the Internet was not self-evident, while their national contexts were also more overtly homophobic. For instance, Peter, the twenty-something sexual refugee from Sub-Saharan Africa, tells about the dangers of online dating:

Our dating was very very tricky also. It's not like in Belgium, you just go on Grindr and you meet people. In (home country), before I left there was no Grindr but there was GayRomeo, Gaydar and all that. And we found out that straight people were going to that site, registered as a gay guy, because they want to extort you, they want to get money from you, they want to blackmail you. So many people were blackmailed.

At the same time, these sites were used because the alternative of picking up a man in the street was even more unsafe: "GayRomeo and all that was used to hook up with guys, because that was the only way we could hook up with guys." However, anonymity was important, so many people didn't put recognizable pictures on their profiles. Moreover, as mentioned above, an added problem indicated by Peter is that many people in his home country do not have Internet in their homes, so they need to use public cyber cafes. Being caught checking gay dating sites there entails the risk of verbal and physical abuse.

Maga from Russia also went online to hook up with guys, but only when he was in Belgium and had his Belgian residence permit, so well into his 20s. He is on GayRomeo and Gaydar but also uses Skype to actually see men before meeting up in real life, as he does not entirely trust the way they present themselves online and wants to see who he deals with. Ahmed from North Africa, who is not at all out of the closet, does use GayRomeo and was the only one participant discussed here to get in touch with us that way. In his home country, he used gay chat sites in a cyber café: "You could chat, but you always had to be careful." In Belgium, he prefers GayRomeo, which is easy if you want to be discreet because you can remain anonymous: "You also have the freedom, you can say it when you don't like something, which you can't do in real life."

Hassan, the North-African sex worker, again puts things in perspective. He didn't have access to Internet in his home country, but learned to use sites such as GayRomeo and Chatroulette in Belgium, in the organization for male sex workers, as an alternative to spending cold nights looking for customers in the city park. Unlike the others, he does not have private access to the Internet, so for him, the situation in Belgium remains as precarious as in his home country.

For all the other sexual refugees, however, chat and dating sites/apps currently offer a safe and anonymous way to get in touch with other men. More than Facebook, gay-oriented

chat and dating sites/apps offer a relatively controllable environment without many threats of context collapse, which render them a more comfortable environment for this most vulnerable group.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The literature on social media uses by LGBTQs points out how anonymity and context collapse are issues for many LGBTQs. As Facebook is in principle "nonymous" (Zhao et al., 2008), many LGBTQs draw on a range of strategies to avoid context collisions, corresponding to their degree of outness (Duguay, 2016; Fox & Warber, 2015). While the literature does refer to the importance of certain, mostly social, contexts, our analysis draws attention in particular to cultural and material contexts. Contrary to most published research on the topic, our participants not only belong to the LGBTQ minority, but they also have a migration background which creates ties with (at least) two cultural contexts, each with a different attitude toward homosexuality.

Based on the differences between the two groups of participants, one could expect to find marked differences in relation to their Facebook uses. On one hand, one could expect the second-generation participants, who are either not (completely) out or keep a distance from their ethno-cultural community in Belgium, to be more worried about context collapse and to be more reluctant to disclose their sexual selves on Facebook. On the other hand, one could expect the sexual refugees, who physically and socially distanced themselves from their (more or less) homophobic culture, to worry less about context collapse. However, analyzing their Facebook uses we were struck by relatively strong similarities between both groups as a whole, as well as important (but parallel) variations within each group.

In terms of similarities between both groups, we found that while most of the sexual refugees do indeed express their sexual selves more openly in everyday life than most of the second-generation participants, on Facebook both groups are equally discreet and they use a similar range of strategies to avoid context collapse, some sexual refugees—the group living in the most precarious conditions—even using two different profiles. In terms of variations within each group, we found that for each individual participant a number of contexts interact and lead to particular strategies of disclosing or concealing their sexual selves on Facebook. These strategies are partly related to the factors already mentioned in the literature, most prominently the degree of outness of LGBTQs to their social network, the presence of conservative family or friends in the network, religion, and professional concerns (Fox & Warber, 2015). However, our interviews also disclose the relevance of cultural and material contexts. These include the social and/or economic dependence on family and members from the ethno-cultural community, economic self-sufficiency, linguistic proficiency and literacy (to communicate on social media), a sense of



psychological security (in relation to homophobic condemnations) and physical safety (from homophobic threats and legislations), and most fundamentally Internet access (through a private computer or a smartphone).

In relation to gay chat and dating sites/apps, context collapse is less of an issue as this is where most participants “compartmentalize” their gay (sexual) life, away from their family and ethno-cultural community. While the literature (Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2015; Gudelunas, 2012; Light, 2014) also discusses the importance of anonymity on such sites, for most of our participants this is actually one of the key issues. Because of the affordance of anonymity, second-generation participants and even most of the sexual refugees, who lived in a particularly homophobic context, were able to explore their sexual selves in relative safety. However, the material conditions mentioned in relation to Facebook are of equal or even greater importance here: a sense of safety from blackmail and physical threat, as well as private access to the Internet. More so than in most published research, gay chat and dating sites/apps provide a lifeline for the participants we studied, while Facebook confronts many of them with a precarious balancing act between cultures, making it necessary to carefully navigate their online selves.

What these insights, taken together, point at are a number of implicit assumptions in much of the writing on social media use (and more broadly Internet use) by LGBTQs. Research participants are generally Western and relatively privileged in terms of Internet access and economic self-sufficiency while also enjoying a relative freedom and safety to explore and express their gender and/or sexual selves. In line with the current emphasis in Internet literature on the close entanglement of “online” and “offline” (Baym, 2010), our study points at the impact not only of social, but also of cultural and material contexts on social media use. To bring greater nuance to work on LGBTQ social media use, we argue for greater diversity within research samples so as to pay closer attention to the importance of social, cultural, and material contexts, which has to date not necessarily been a focal point of the majority of research in this area, particularly with regard to gay men’s digital cultures.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Notes

1. At the beginning of the interview, all participants were asked which term they preferred to describe their sexuality,

and depending on the language of the interview, the participants discussed here preferred the terms gay (English), homo (Dutch), or homosexual (French), although some hesitated to fully identify as such.

2. We are aware of the complexity and limitations of the idea of generations of migrations (see, for example, Rumbaut, 2004), but this classification does capture the shared migration background of our participants.
3. All quotes are verbatim transcriptions of the interview (if it was conducted in English) or literal translations by the first author (if it was conducted in Dutch or French, the two main official languages in Belgium).
4. Moustapha has since obtained the refugee status, but he does remain cautious about revealing his sexual orientation on Facebook.

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