'Even though it's a small checkbox, it's a big deal': stresses and strains of managing sexual identity(s) on Facebook

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Published online: 14 Jan 2015.

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'Even though it's a small checkbox, it's a big deal': stresses and strains of managing sexual identity(s) on Facebook

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Facebook offers a socialisation context in which young people from ethnic, gender and sexual minorities must continually manage the potential for prejudice and discrimination in the form of homophobia and racism. In-depth interviews were conducted with eight young women, aged 16–19 years, who self-identified as queer and as women of colour. A detailed analysis of these interviews – focusing in particular on how young people described navigating expectations of rejection from family and friends – offered insight into the psychological and health consequences associated with managing sexual identity(s) while online. The 'closet' ultimately takes on new meaning in this virtual space: participants described trying to develop social relationships within Facebook, which demands sharing one's thoughts, behaviours and ideas, while also hiding and silencing their emerging sexuality. In this 'virtual closet', tempering self-presentation to offset social exclusion has become a continuous, yet personally treacherous, activity during the daily practice of using Facebook.

Keywords: Internet; sexual identity; homophobia; racism; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth; USA

Introduction

Social networking sites have become central to the way young people communicate in their everyday lives. In the USA, online environments are increasingly settings in which young people form peer connections, develop sexual identities and connect with larger communities (Stokes 2007; Manago, Taylor, and Greenfield 2012). Digital contexts bring with them new questions about how social exclusion may be experienced differently online, especially for ethnic and sexual minority youth who are growing up within sociopolitical contexts shaped by homophobia and racism. The Internet is largely regarded as a space with liberatory potential, where young people can form connections without the stigma associated with their 'offline' identities (Hillier and Harrison 2007; Fraser 2010; McDermott and Roen 2012). Alongside this potential for freedom, however, young people may face unique stressors as they navigate social norms that privilege heterosexuality and whiteness both on- and offline.

In this paper, we focus on real and anticipated experiences of social exclusion that young people described while using the social network Facebook. Although most young people manage their online identity (or identities), these decisions may bring different social, emotional and health consequences for those who are targets of homophobia and racism. We explore these complexities, as well as the difficulties with 'remaining closeted' on Facebook, through interviews with eight lesbian and bisexual-identified women

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of colour, aged 16–19 years. In the analysis, we were particularly attentive to the psychological processes involved in managing sexual identity(s) as participants described navigating the daily practice of building who they are (and who they could be) on Facebook. Taking a cue from the field of critical public health (e.g.,Walsemann, Gee, and Geronimus 2009), we investigated how social networking as a daily practice has important implications for self-presentation, the reproduction of social norms and perpetuating experiences of stigma.

Facebook provides a particular form of social connection: individuals post information to reflect their authentic 'offline' self, as well as to cultivate and maintain relationships on the site. Researchers from a variety of disciplines have found that interactions on Facebook also serve to reinforce social norms through the surveillance of profile content by one's friend network (Westlake 2008). As Fahs and Gohr (2012) contend, interpersonal interactions on Facebook coalesce in the form of virtual ridicule – discourses in which individuals are judged or otherwise restricted in their self-expression. In this regard, Fahs and Gohr argue that Facebook directs people to reproduce the same racial, gender and sexuality norms as the 'outernet', and that heteronormative ideals impact upon user decisions on Facebook. For example, outing oneself as a member of a gender or sexual minority can result in cyberbullying or 'defriending'. Queer young people may therefore remain closeted on Facebook: some may 'pass' as heterosexual on their profile by hiding their relationship status or not indicating their own gender identity or the gender of their desired partner. As a result, the number of spaces in which queer youth can express themselves and share experiences of discrimination are limited rather than necessarily expanded through social networking. This, we argue, has the potential to produce a virtual form of the 'closet' by reinforcing heteronormative ideals and silencing queer voices in settings such as Facebook.

Recognising that young people respond to their environmental cues with keen protective sensibilities, we ask: how do marginalised youth manage their ethnic/racial, gender and sexual identity(s) on Facebook? We use the term 'sexual identity(s)' here, rather than a singular form of 'identity' or the plural 'identities', to acknowledge the potential development of plural selves, particularly in online environments. These sexual identity(s) may be simultaneous, fluid, contradictory, sometimes more or less authentically experienced, but nevertheless managed. The marking of this as identity(s) keeps central the idea that identity is not necessarily a singular expression or development, and that having several identities is not simply a move from one to more than one. Sexual identity (s) may, in fact, be more accurately imagined as both singular and plural simultaneously. We frame the development and management of sexual identity(s) as a psychological strategy made in the face of oppression – yet, like many protective manoevres, one that comes with a cost. In this study, we examine how young people developed strategies, such as tempering self-presentation on Facebook, and highlight the psychological processes young women described as they monitored their Facebook communications.

Background

Identity(s) management on Facebook

Facebook is the most popular form of online communication among young people aged 12–17 in the USA, with 94% of this cohort maintaining a profile (Madden 2012). Young people typically construct their 'profile', 'add' or 'block' online friendships and respond to friends' 'status' updates as a way to communicate shared interests or affirm ('like') user content (Madden et al. 2013). Accordingly, young people actively participate on Facebook

as a way to receive approval from peers (Manago, Taylor, and Greenfield 2012) and to construct an online public persona (Taylor, Falconer, and Snowdon 2014).

In addition to persona construction, scholars have also described online environments as an important tool for practising same-sex identities (Hillier and Harrison 2007), coping with depression and self-harm (McDermott, Roen, and Piela 2014) and forming supportive peer relationships (Fraser 2010). In an interview study with 38 sexual minority young adults, Taylor and colleagues (2014) found that some participant's perceived 'coming out' on Facebook as transformative for their emotional health due to the social support they garnered from their friend network. Other participants, however, were reluctant to share their sexual orientation due to the 'irreversible consequences' of publically stating this type of information. These findings suggest that Facebook affords emotional and social benefits to young people, such as offering a platform to discuss love, sex or things that young people may be ashamed about, only when they perceive their friend network as accepting.

Beyond simply regulating Facebook content, Zhao and colleagues (2008) have proposed that participants edit information on their profile to reflect socially endorsed interests seen in their friend network. Using a content analysis of Facebook accounts, the authors found that bisexual participants actively hid their sexuality on Facebook, while heterosexual participants openly shared relationships and romance. These findings suggest that sexual minority youth may adopt different management strategies than their heterosexual peers on Facebook, perhaps as a tactic to mitigate discrimination. This leads to an additional question when assessing social networks and adolescent development: do these consistent management decisions carry a different set of obstacles for young people who live at various intersections of ethnicity/race, gender and sexual orientation?

Race, queerness and health

Young people in the USA experience inequalities in several domains of their lives and navigate stressors based on their social location, including isolation from peers and rejection from their families of origin (Meyer 2003). A substantial body of literature has found that individuals from marginalised social groups experience excess stressors and negative health outcomes as a result of their social locatedness (e.g.,Szymanski and Sung 2010; Frost, Lehavot and Meyer 2013). Chronic exposure to discrimination in adults has been linked to increased risk of cardiovascular disease and elevated blood pressure (Friedman et al. 2009), as well as premature illness and mortality (Williams and Mohammed 2009). Research in the USA has consistently found that lesbian, gay and bisexual youth have higher risk of depression, anxiety and suicide than their heterosexual peers (Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter 2011) and increased risk for substance use (Darwich, Hymel, and Waterhouse 2012). Additionally, lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals who conceal their sexual orientation from their social relationships are at risk for increased stress hormone levels (Juster et al. 2013) and decreased mental health (Rothman et al. 2012) compared to those lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals who have disclosed their sexual identity to others (e.g., parents or friends). These consistent findings highlight how the health consequences of navigating social exclusion should not be underestimated.

Research indicates that queer youth of colour must additionally navigate peer networks, cultural values and family expectations when deciding to disclose their sexual identity. Rasmussen (2004) argued that 'coming out' as gay, lesbian or bisexual is influenced by a young person's racial or ethnic background, age and religious affiliation, meaning that a visible queer identity may be extremely difficult for some due to a lack of

support. Rosario and colleagues (2004) found that heterosexism within racial/ethnic minority communities played a role in sexual identity disclosure; queer youth of colour indicated 'less comfort' disclosing their sexual orientation compared to white teenagers. These patterns accentuate multiple oppressions that sexual minority youth of colour navigate, including social exclusion based on sexual orientation, racial prejudice and the potential for limited acceptance within their own cultural communities (Harper, Jernewall, and Zea 2004). Given these previous findings, how does sexual, gender and ethnic/racial identity management on Facebook affect young people's emotional health and opportunities for social support?

To explore these questions, we drew on a set of semi-structured interviews with young lesbian or bisexual-identified women of colour. These interviews enabled us think more carefully about the phenomenon of sexual identity(s) management and the psychological costs of monitoring Facebook content. In our analysis we examined: (1) how participants revealed or concealed their sexual identity(s) on Facebook and (2) the emotional dimensions of managing information about their sexual identity(s). We focused on experience of being young, queer and a person of colour within a highly scrutinised online network and potential consequences of social exclusionary practices within such a context.

Methods

Young women between the ages of 16 and 19 who self-identified as lesbian, bisexual or queer and as a person of colour were invited to participate in a study about Internet use. Participants were recruited through websites and community venues. Online postings were added to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender message boards, listservs, websites and Facebook groups. Recruitment materials solicited volunteers to take part in a study about how young people express their sexual and racial identities online. Eight young women agreed to participate in the interview portion of the study.

Participants lived in the San Francisco Bay Area and other locations in the USA and were in high school or college at the time of the interview. Three participants identified as African American, two as Mexican-American, one as El Salvadorian-American and two as Asian American. Five identified as lesbian and three as bisexual. The purpose of the eight interviews was not to identify findings of relevance to all sexual minority youth, but instead for their ability to offer insight into the phenomenon of life inside the highly structured (and structuring) world of social networking. The interviews were imagined to produce 'provocative generalisability' and the opportunity to 'rethink and reimagine current arrangements' (Fine 2006, 98). With this in mind, we turned to the interview data to think carefully about how young people contended with stigma on- and offline.

Participants were given a detailed explanation of their rights before the interview. Those younger than 18 were not required to have parental consent, as some had not disclosed their sexual orientation to their parent(s). To ensure anonymity, participants' names, personal information, consent forms and interview transcripts were kept in a locked cabinet. Additionally, audio files and digital transcripts were stored on a password-protected diskdrive. Lastly, pseudonyms were used within the interview transcripts and all written materials.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted in person and by phone by a female-identified woman of colour (JDR). Although online interviewing has been useful due to its ability to provide

anonymity for participants (McDermott and Roen 2012; McDermott, Roen, and Piela 2013), other feminist researchers have found that face-to-face and phone interviewing fosters a more personal relationship between researcher and participant (Hesse-Biber 2012). In addition, in-person and phone interviews enabled participants' sexual identities from being unintentionally revealed during parental surveillance of their online activity (Ayling and Mewse 2009). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and entered into NVivo 8. Thematic analysis strategies were used to explore participants' descriptions, as well as identify, analyse and report patterns within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). In developing themes, we referred to previous studies regarding the Internet, young people and identity management (e.g.,Fraser 2010; Brown and Thomas 2014). In particular, we derived themes with a focus on the emotional labour involved in tempering self-presentation and navigating expectations of rejection in on- and offline contexts.

Findings

Participants

The eight women in the study all described themselves as daily Facebook users who used the platform to connect with friends and family. Maya, an 18-year-old El Salvadorian-American, lived with her older sister and described herself as a 'Facebook fanatic'. Isabel, an 18-year-old Mexican-American, had recently started college and used Facebook to maintain her friendships with her high school classmates. Jo, an 18-year-old African American, attended a suburban high school and spent her time on Facebook to stay connected with her teammates. Dylan, a 17-year-old Asian American, attended an urban high school and described using Facebook as a way to share her life with peers. Amanda, a 17-year-old African American, lived with her older brother and reported checking Facebook daily to comment on her friend's statuses. Anisha, a 16-year-old African American, lived with her grandparents and visited Facebook 'at least five times a day' to update her profile. Arianna, an 18-year-old Mexican-American, belonged to a college sorority and used Facebook to stay connected with family members who lived in Mexico. Brianna, a 17-year-old Asian American, was the president of her class and checked Facebook daily to 'stay popular' at her high school.

Emotional labour of concealment

Participants described making laboured decisions about queer visibility in their families. Links between family and cultural norms produced enormous emotional labour for young women– they described navigating Otherness both within and beyond their networks, and the emotional toll this sometimes took on them. For example, Maya described feeling ashamed about her same-sex attraction as a result of pressure to conform to her family's heteronormative ideals. Her narrative speaks to the emotional repercussions of growing up as someone who feels she does not belong within her community:

> In El Salvador, it is very conservative. In the family I came from, it was always man, woman, get married and live a fairytale life … I remember crying all of the time and wondering, 'Why do I like this girl? This is really weird.' And over the years, I would shun my feelings. I would try to repress everything. If I ever felt another feeling for a girl, I would totally push it to the side.

Maya described how she learned to negotiate her sexual development while feeling 'weird' and cutting off her feelings of attraction for other girls. While this is not an unfamiliar discourse, it is a useful reminder of how sexual identity construction is often

shaped and constrained, sometimes leading to a silencing of same-sex sexuality as a strategy to maintain social capital (Gibson and Macleod 2012).

In addition to family expectations for heterosexual marriage, heterosexual femininity was another form of social surveillance for participants. For instance, Isabel struggled for acceptance within her family where rigid gender and sexuality norms were well-established:

> You know that rule in the military, 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'? It's kind of like that … I feel like there is a lot of homophobia and acceptance issues in the Latino community. That is why I haven't come out to my dad …. He has a co-worker that identifies as a gay man. And he calls him *la mierda* [effeminate man]. And for a woman, he calls her '*la machorra*' [a woman with the appearance of a man].

For Isabel, discreet forms of interpersonal heterosexism required her to negotiate her queerness within the contradiction of family acceptance and heteronormative rejection. In this sense, navigating Otherness directed Isabel to constantly manage her gender and sexual identities so as to conform to social norms, as well as to make laboured decisions about visibility. For example, family norms shaped her decisions about gender presentation: 'When I go home on the weekends, I always dress how my mom and sisters do, very feminine. But that's like not how I look everyday, like that just doesn't fit who I am.'

While Maya and Isabel's strategies may have helped, these protective behaviours also came with an emotional cost. For example, Arianna described how evading sexual stigma was exhausting: 'Sometimes I just want to put my guard down and stop worrying about my parents and friends disapproving of me. I hate it every day.' Brianna similarly recounted the strains of concealment: 'It's the silence that gets you. You know, not being able to share all of these things that I am feeling.' In addition to shaping their family relationships, daily practices of monitoring extended to adolescents' Facebook networks; participants expressed similar strategies of monitoring online interactions, mirroring the labours of managing queer desires offline.

Facebook and homophobia

Participants' descriptions consistently referenced the dual nature of Facebook: it was integral to their daily experiences, while it was also consistently effortful. Maya, for example, specified how she saw her profile as socially integrated: 'It's almost like someone reading your diary. But that is how we all keep up with each other, through liking what my friends post.' Amanda similarly described how this level of integration often turned towards gauging peer attitudes: 'It's important to see if friends like what I am saying. I definitely don't mention anything about liking girls because I don't know anyone at school who does.'

Participants described Facebook as producing a feeling of being under constant surveillance by family and peers, which lead them to monitor social interactions carefully. This vigilance often produced worries about being 'outed' online, as well as participants ruminating about their Facebook content. Just as Amanda evaluated sexuality norms on Facebook to maintain social capital, Arianna assessed the risks of being stereotyped on her profile:

> I am friends with my younger brother on Facebook. I've seen him post things on his friend's walls that sexualise girls who are bisexual and lesbian. He'll call them sluts or not good enough to get a real man. It hurts. I am close with my brother so I don't want him to judge me.

Amanda and Arianna's decisions to 'pass' as heterosexual on their profiles demonstrates the ways that marginalised youth react to heteronormative microaggression on Facebook.

Research has found that microaggression – in the form of daily verbal or behavioral insults towards members of oppressed groups, can have negative mental health consequences for individuals who experience it (e.g., Nadal et al. 2011). We can see how Amanda and Arianna's decisions to temper self-presentation on Facebook were a strategy to offset the repercussions of prejudice, yet this strategy also obscured their ability to express their interests and identity(s) online.

There were additional examples of participants' encounters with homophobic slurs on Facebook. Jo expressed that microaggression was a routine part of Facebook interactions: 'There are always negative comments about your choices and who you are. This is just a normal part of Facebook. Everyone can take part in the conversation because that is how Facebook works' (see also, Wingfield 2014). Anisha similarly described experiences with homophobia on Facebook and how she had developed ways of adapting to expressions of everyday homophobia she constantly saw in her newsfeed:

> Some will post things frequently like, 'that's so gay' as an insult so everyone can see. It makes me feel terrible, which is probably why I am not open about girls on Facebook. I don't want to feel unaccepted by my friends and family. I guess I could delete them, but I see them at school. And I feel like this could just cause problems.

Both Anisha and Jo's narratives highlight how online environments do not erase oppressive discourses; rather, discrimination takes on a new form through the use of networked technologies (Nakamura 2013). Facebook interactions create a unique set of conditions for exclusion: as homophobic comments linger, and users must decide how to reveal or conceal their own experiences, well beyond the initial comment. Anisha decided, within this set of conditions, to not be 'open about girls' on Facebook. In this sense, Facebook comments have a temporal element that differs from in-person interactions, as individuals and their friends can see the comment long after it was initially uttered – making the comment relatively permanent, reproducible and accessible to one's social network (Kowalski et al. 2014).

Labour of social surveillance

Throughout the interviews, young women described the costs of social surveillance. Participants described the identity management strategies they used to avoid the double binds of racism and homophobia. For instance, Jo recounted how 'being out' was made more difficult by her hyper-visibility as 'the only Black person' in her town:

> People stare. They say things to my brother . . . . Sometimes you feel really scared. I have the feeling that I might get hurt . . . . I am already out of place for being, like, one of the only African American students. I don't want to also feel out of place for telling everyone that I am bisexual.

Jo detailed working hard to understand her surroundings by remembering past actions of peers before disclosing her sexuality. Participant's laboured choices, as exemplified by Jo's experience, echo many Black feminists who have written about how Otherness emotionally coalesces and drains one of energy (Ahmed 2007, 2009).

Jo's vigilance about the trappings of racism also informed her decision to conceal her sexual orientation on her Facebook profile, a place where some share details about themselves, such as their sexual orientation or relationship status. She described in detail the ways that she censored her profile to mitigate stigma:

> I don't mark my sexual orientation on Facebook partly because I have family on [Facebook] . . . and partly because there is hatred against gays and lesbians in the USA, in my school, and with my parents. It is just something that I do not want to make public because everyone can

see. So yes, I guess you can say I pass on [Facebook]. But I just don't feel like I got any other choice.

Although Jo designed her Facebook profile with the intent of self-authoring a public online persona, she also described how she needed to be attentive to potential homophobic backlash from family and peers. Her decision to remain closeted demonstrates how seemingly mundane decisions on Facebook, such as leaving a checkbox unmarked, are a way to protect oneself and maintain relationships. Yet, managing 'otherness' also comes with the costs of silence and the stress of being 'outed'.

Dylan also reported that she struggled with surveillance of her Facebook content. Her comments direct us to consider what she wishes she could share with her peers – being 'out' on Facebook is not merely 'a small checkbox' but is, in fact, 'a big deal':

> I always wanted to share my thoughts and crushes on Facebook, but people would just chime in with some mean comment. So no, I never listed it ... that would have been weird at my school. I think a lot of people aren't out on Facebook because it is seen as kind of an aggressive way to say what your sexuality is. Even though it is just a small checkbox, it is a big deal. Most of my [queer] friends don't list their sexuality as well. They think it is a big move to say it.

Dylan's decision to remain closeted on Facebook was a calculated one, produced with an audience in mind and used as a strategy to avoid further social exclusion based on her identity positions. Her description makes several points clear: to be queer is one thing, to claim it publicly is another, and to incorporate this identity on Facebook is considered not only a form of communication with peers, but an 'aggressive' one.

Given the perpetual surveillance of profile content, Facebook can be a much more complex space than the non-virtual world as young people negotiate the process of taking up (or concealing) sexual identity(s). Participants attention to profile construction leads us to consider how 'the closet' (Sedgwick 1990) is both re-produced and re-imagined on Facebook. The daily practice of Facebook encourages users to share the most intimate aspects of their lives, yet this is impossible for youth who labour under feelings of otherness. These users must decide and correctly anticipate when checking a box on their profile might be seen as 'aggressive' or as a form of social connection with peers. Although concealing one's sexual orientation is often used as a coping strategy aimed at evading discrimination, it is a coping strategy that can rebound and become stressful (Miller and Major 2000). These management practices may present additional opportunities for stress due to the visibility of Facebook content, which paradoxically ask individuals to share, be liked and be themselves.

Ruminating about profile content

Within participant's descriptions were consistent themes of how they ruminated about their Facebook content and the emotional tenor of constant self-monitoring. Anisha, for example, described wanting to 'share' in status updates but feeling constrained because she wasn't out: 'I want to post a picture of my girl or that we held hands. But it's just not the right time right now ... I haven't told my parents yet.' Similar to Anisha's struggles with self-presentation on Facebook, Arianna grappled with unintentional outing despite tracking profile content:

> When I post stuff [on Facebook], I leave it very vague. I don't want people to know [my sexuality]. I am very careful with gender. Last year, one of my [sorority] sisters outed me online. There was a picture with two of my sorority sisters and I wanted to make the caption 'I love these girls.' But I forgot to put 'these' so it just said, 'I love girls.' I didn't realise that I posted that. My sorority sister posted a comment that said, 'Yeah, we already know!'

Anisha and Arianna did not simply share aspects of themselves on Facebook; instead, their Facebook identities were also made through anticipating how others would respond to these identities – and for most participants, their peer groups had already made clear that same-sex desires and/or relationships were something to be ashamed of. By noting participants' micro-focus on sharing details of crushes, dates, gendered pronouns and even 'likes' on their profiles to counter unintentional outing, we can more clearly see the heightened forms of labour; these young women were not just managing a singular sexual identity, but juggling several iterations of their identity(s) on Facebook. Although each identity was part of their experience, they did not always appear as multiple to audiences. However, identity(s) should nevertheless be recognised as plural and, for some, in flux, due to the decisions that young people make while navigating Facebook.

Management of sexual identity(s) as a strategy to avoid rejection may have consequences for the emotional well-being of young people. Moments of homophobia or 'outing' may not be perceived as exclusionary by the perpetrator, but such interactions can cause feelings of helplessness and fear in the target (Nadal et al. 2011). For instance, Brianna spoke to this constant need to manage her Facebook profile:

> You always have to be aware of what people are posting on your wall throughout the day. You never know what they may say and who can see it. So it's not like you can take a break from checking your Facebook because you need to see who has posted something negative about you .... I check it to make sure that everything is ok in case my parents would find out that I went on a date with a girl.

The strains of these daily management practices were echoed in Amanda's experiences of struggling to 'just be herself' on Facebook:

> My friends talk about Facebook sometimes. They all say that they just try to be themselves. But I don't know if I can just be myself when parts of me are hidden from everyone else … So I do think a lot about what I post. Sometimes I just have to delete what people say on my wall.

For Brianna and Amanda, the labour of Otherness does not end when they exit Facebook; instead, they ruminate about the stresses and strains of surveillance in their daily lives that results from (potential) Facebook interactions. The psychological costs of 'self-surveillance, self-monitoring, and self-discipline' (Gill 2008, 441) on Facebook are an important consideration, especially since stigma can cause emotional distress for targets (Major and O'Brien 2005).

Although some participants navigated concealment, others chose to delete their Facebook account altogether. We can interpret this erasure as a response to gender, sexual and racial norms that limit self-presentation on Facebook. Dylan, for example, described feeling worried about homophobic comments from classmates who would come across her profile. As a result, she deleted her profile as a way to maintain her personal safety:

> I am careful about what information I will share online. I am concerned with my personal safety for being queer .... I got rid of [Facebook] because I didn't like the types of subjectivities that the platform produced .... And I was tired of worrying about my Facebook content from people who didn't approve of me.

Dylan's decision to walk away from Facebook is not merely about one woman taking a break from social networking, but symbolic of a greater loss – especially for youth navigating feelings of marginalisation. Concerned with the costs of monitoring social interactions, Dylan saw deleting her Facebook account as the only strategy to offset rejection for her self-presentation – a self-presentation that transgressed an interlocking set of norms around her gender non-conformity, her queerness and, her race. Dylan's

experiences, along with other young women in this study, indicate that young women are managing the realities of a new type of 'closet' on Facebook. It is within this context that participants described managing multiple, fractured and to some extent, silent iterations of their sexual identity(s).

Discussion

'Offline' or 'real life' experiences of stigma obviously entail a great deal of emotional labour. Facebook, however, requires us to see more, and perhaps, see differently. We developed this study as a way to ask whether Facebook, in fact, was a context that produced a unique set of stressors associated with online environments. We wondered, for example, about the effects of friends 'liking' or posting a homophobic comment. We wondered about the sting of these interactions and whether these moments reverberated longer due to the visibility of Facebook communication. We want to highlight several findings from this study that may offer theoretical guidance to researchers working on adolescent development within online environments. Several terms proved useful in our analysis: sexual identity(s), Facebook as daily practice and the virtual closet. We discuss each term below in more detail.

Sexual identity(s)

We situate our findings with feminist research that considers the influence of culture, community and relationships in the formation of young women's sexual identities (Diamond 2006). We developed the term sexual identity(s), rather than a singular form of identity, to acknowledge the role of situational and interpersonal factors in shaping management of sexuality in digital contexts. Without increased attention to the local social conditions of Facebook, self-presentation on Facebook risks being theorised as coherent; this approach ignores decision-making around the use of multiple and simultaneous sexual identity(s) as a protective maneuver to mitigate oppression. These laboured decisions contradict the findings from social science research that positions all young women's online lives as self-evident, resistant and emphatically positive (see Brown and Thomas 2014).

Sexuality in all forms is situated within cultural contexts; however, the management of sexual identity(s) emphasises the highly interactive and social aspects of development in the digital age. Theories of sexual identity development often position the formation and integration of a sexual minority identity as an important developmental goal, with a single coherent identity seen as an indicator of psychological adjustment (Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter 2011). Yet, this approach at times underestimates the wide range of heteronormative and racist conditions that may make it difficult for individuals to express queerness due to fear of social rejection. Researchers are encouraged to view sexual identity(s) as not necessarily an indicator of pathology or immaturity; instead, the development of singular and plural identity(s) may be a psychological strategy that young people use as they navigate their daily practice of social networking.

Feminist scholars such as Jennifer Nash (2008) and Robyn Wiegman (2012) have called for greater attention to race, gender and sexual orientation as social processes that operate in distinct and particular ways. This intervention emphasises the role of history in shaping identity development, inviting scholars to analyse what has yet to be imagined within intersections between subjecthood and marginalisation. The young women in this study demonstrate how managing and constructing online identity(s) is not static but, rather, a highly social process shaped by digital relationships and norms. In this sense, the 'Facebook self' could perhaps be more understood as a co-construction since it is

produced with an audience in mind, it is constructed through ongoing interactions, the involvement of one's friend network and – importantly – it is produced by historically racialised relationships that create new ways to feel the weight of 'public' stigmas. The intertwined aspects of subjectivity-building and social norms on Facebook are an example of what Ahmed (2007) called 'orientations'. Ahmed argued that Whiteness 'orients' bodies in specific contexts, affecting how they 'take up' space and contributing to feelings of 'out-of-placeness' for people of colour. Just as Whiteness structures visibility and privilege, so does heterosexuality orient what is within reach for young people as they manage their sexual identity(s) on Facebook. Our findings suggest that homophobia and heterosexism on Facebook exacerbate feelings of Otherness for queer youth and that they are highly attuned to the ways that they temper, conceal and whitewash their self-presentation as they strive to maintain relationships with peers and family.

Facebook as daily practice

The daily practice of Facebook invites us to consider the structuring effects of technology for young people's identity(s) both on- and off-line. Maintaining a Facebook profile has become a part of daily life for many young people in the USA, where not participating can mean appearing 'unavailable' or self-excluding oneself from contemporary youth culture (Robards 2014). Given Facebook's prominence in the ecology of adolescent life, the ongoing management of a Facebook profile signals a shift in how young people maintain relationships, articulate their self-presentation and sustain social capital.

As most young people in the USA live part of their day on Facebook, moments of 'virtual stigma' move through an expanse of status updates, wall posts and 'likes', producing uneven consequences for young people already labouring under the weight of Otherness in their everyday lives. The psychological implications of managing identity(s) on Facebook are essential to consider, especially since these interactions are a continuous daily practice for many young people, meaning these expenditures become mundane and hard to notice. Participants in this study described feelings of depression, shame and anxiety when monitoring Facebook content due to fears of social exclusion and unintentional 'outing'.

Findings also suggest that young people adopted psychological strategies to offset the sting of hostile or derogatory slights, such as ruminating about profile content or actively concealing their sexual orientation. The psychological costs of these management practices, however, may be different than offline strategies because online communication is accessible 24 hours a day. For the target of racist or homophobic microaggression, this makes it seem as though one cannot escape experiences of rejection due to the relative permanence of online messages (Kowalski et al. 2014).

The virtual closet

Participants' descriptions of 'leaving a box unchecked' on Facebook, in this case 'boxes' that denote sexual orientation or gender of partner, offer insight into the production of a new type of 'closet' within the digital age. Previous research has found that the Internet offers a safety net for youth who experience rejection by providing opportunities for friendships through the form of lesbian, gay and bisexual support groups (McDermott and Roen 2012). However, our findings illustrate how interactions on Facebook can create a new form of closet by reinforcing heteronormative ideals through 'liking' (i.e., clicking the 'like' button) homophobic content on Facebook or posting offensive comments. While remaining closeted on Facebook may temporarily avert sexual stigma, this strategy also limits online

community support with other queer youth. These networks are important because other forms of sexual minority community engagement (e.g., bars, community events) are largely inaccessible to this cohort (Dyson et al. 2003).

Future directions

This study aimed to capture the experiences of the first cohort to adopt social networking as a daily practice in the USA. This study provides a window into the experiences of socially marginalised youth as they managed their sexual identity(s) on Facebook; however, this study is only a first step. Experiences of sexual minority youth in other countries may be different due to the social, cultural and political factors that contextualise queer acceptance.

Future research might usefully focus in on the psychological qualities of management strategies used on Facebook and other social networks. These assessments may provide insight into the types of strategies used in concealment, and the affective dimensions of these experiences. For example, do some sexual minority youth identify as heterosexual on their profile as a means of reducing stigma? What steps do young people take to unmake previous online identity(s) and remake new identity(s) on social media? Interrogating the meanings behind absences and presences during online communication may elucidate nuanced layers of complex management strategies and their emotional impacts on young people.

Importantly, the health consequences involved in this everyday vigilance should also be examined, especially since experiences of marginalisation can produce anxiety for young people (Frost, Lehavot and Meyer 2013). Assessing mental health outcomes may aid in the development of approaches to help young people cope with the stressors of online exclusion. Parents, relatives, healthcare providers, schools and mentors might usefully work with young people to provide safe spaces for them to examine their own self-definitions and attitudes about sexuality, race/ethnicity and gender as well as develop support networks with peers (Rasmussen 2006; Harris 2005). These programmes may buffer against the effects of rejection experienced in offline contexts (such as school) as well as online contexts (such as cyberbullying).

In conclusion, we found several characteristics that are useful in studies of adolescent development. We found that emotional labour was integral to the consistent monitoring of Facebook profiles and that rumination was not an uncommon response to worrying about being outed or unintentionally outing oneself. We found that these responses formed a type of 'virtual closet' for young women, as they largely remained silent about their lesbian and bisexual identities. And, lastly, we found that these online environments created a set of sexual identity(s). Acknowledging the development of both singular and plural sexual identity(s) enabled us to observe the strategies young people used to reveal and conceal their emerging sexual subjectivity within the digital age.

Acknowledgements

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Résumé

Facebook est un univers de socialisation dans lequel les jeunes appartenant à des minorités ethniques, de genre et sexuelles doivent constamment gérer un potentiel de préjugés et de discrimination se manifestant par l'homophobie et le racisme dans les interactions entre abonnés.

Des entretiens en profondeur ont été conduits avec huit jeunes femmes âgées de 16 à 19 ans, s'auto-identifiant comme queer et comme femmes de couleur. Une analyse détaillée de ces entretiens – focalisée en particulier sur la manière avec laquelle les jeunes ont décrit comment ils maîtrisaient leurs appréhensions quant à un rejet de la part de leur famille et de leurs amis – a offert une perspective sur les conséquences uniques, au plan psychologique et sur la santé, associées à la gestion des identités sexuelles en ligne. Nous considérons qu'à terme, le « placard » revêt un nouveau sens dans cet espace virtuel: les participantes ont déclaré qu'elles essayaient de développer des relations sociales sur Facebook, ce qui exige d'un individu qu'il partage ses propres réflexions, ses comportements et ses idées avec d'autres, tout en cachant et en réduisant au silence sa sexualité émergente. Dans ce « placard virtuel », la modération de l'auto-présentation en vue de compenser l'exclusion sociale est devenue une activité ordinaire, bien que périlleuse au plan personnel, lors de l'utilisation quotidienne de Facebook.

Resumen

Facebook ofrece un contexto de socialización en el que los jóvenes de minorías étnicas, sexuales y de género deben bregar continuamente con los posibles prejuicios y la discriminación en forma de homofobia y racismo durante las interacciones en Facebook. Para este estudio se llevaron a cabo entrevistas exhaustivas con ocho mujeres jóvenes, con edades comprendidas entre los 16 y los 19 años, que se autoidentificaron como lesbianas y mujeres de color. Un análisis detallado de estas entrevistas, en el que se prestó atención en particular al modo en que las jóvenes describían cómo sobrellevaban las expectativas de rechazo por parte de la familia y los amigos, aportó información sobre las particulares consecuencias psicológicas y sanitarias relacionadas con la gestión de la(s) identidad(es) sexuales en Internet. Sostenemos que 'salir del armario' adquiere en última instancia un nuevo significado en este espacio virtual: las participantes describieron cómo intentaban establecer relaciones sociales en Facebook, donde es indispensable compartir opiniones, conductas e ideas, a la vez que ocultaban y silenciaban su sexualidad emergente. En este "armario virtual", atenuar la propia representación para evitar la exclusión sexual se ha convertido en una actividad cotidiana, aunque también peligrosa para la personalidad en la práctica diaria del uso de Facebook.