"'More gay' fits in better": Intracommunity Power Dynamics and Harms in Online LGBTQ+ Spaces

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ABSTRACT

Online spaces play crucial roles in the lives of most LGBTQ+ people, but can also replicate and exacerbate existing intracommunity tensions and power dynamics, potentially harming subgroups within this marginalized community. Using qualitative probes and interviews, we engaged a diverse group of 25 bi+ (attracted to more than one gender) people to explore these dynamics. We identify two types of intracommunity conflict that bi+ users face (validity and normative conflicts), and a resulting set of what we call latent harms, or coping strategies for dealing with conflict that have delayed negative psychological effects for bi+ users. Using intersectionality as a sensitizing concept to understand shifting power dynamics embedded in sociotechnical contexts, we discuss challenges for future design work including the need to account for intracommunity dynamics within marginalized groups and the utility of disentangling conflict from harm.

Author Keywords

online communities, bisexuality, pansexuality, social media, conflict, harm, power dynamics, intersectionality

CSS Concepts

• **Social and professional topics~Sexual orientation** • Human-centered computing~Social media

INTRODUCTION

Online spaces play a crucial role in the social lives of LGBTQ+ people [43, 70]. These online spaces often serve as the primary sites of LGBTQ+ identity exploration and development, as well as hubs of social support networks [6, 27, 43, 104]. As offline LGBTQ+ spaces have disappeared [30], access to and acceptance into these online spaces is crucial for many LGBTQ+ people who may not have access to offline resources or social support [45].

Recent research has found that online social spaces may not be supportive for all members of the LGBTQ+ population. For example, transgender individuals report harms from other LGBTQ+ people online [91]. This reflects long-standing trends in research with LGBTQ+ populations, which has noted intracommunity tensions based on race [63], socioeconomic status [32], body size [102], attraction to more than one gender [60, 99], serostatus [61], and trans identity [99]. This kind of intracommunity stigmatization and tension can result in a range of effects including identity invalidation [1], loss of social support [101], and a variety of negative long term mental and physical health outcomes [7, 8, 36, 58]. Given the evidence of the negative impacts of intracommunity tensions that are being replicated in online LGBTQ+ social spaces [39, 50, 91] and how important these spaces are for LGBTQ+ people [43, 70], we need to better understand how these intracommunity tensions play out in online spaces and how this, in turn, impacts behavior, access to resources, and community participation.

In this study, we engaged the perspectives of bi+ individuals, or people who are attracted to more than one gender, to examine the kinds of conflicts, power dynamics, and harms that manifest within online LGBTQ+ social spaces. Bi+ people make up more than half of the LGBTQ+ population [21], and experience tensions with the larger LGBTQ+ community [99, 101] as well as a pervasive lack of visibility in both culture [55, 93] and public policy [105]. Bi+ people also experience worse physical and mental health outcomes than either their same-gender or different-gender attracted counterparts [12, 36, 58, 75]. Examining the experiences of bi+ people in online spaces allows us to draw out how intracommunity power dynamics manifest online, deepen our understanding of online harms, and begin to construct more supportive and widely-inclusive versions of the online spaces that are so crucial to LGBTQ+ people. We asked:

RQ1: What conflicts and harms do bi+ individuals face when interacting in LGBTQ+ online social spaces?

RQ2: How do bi+ individuals respond to these challenges?

We conducted a ten-week Asynchronous Remote Community [65, 66] (ARC) study comprised of qualitative probes and individual interviews deployed in an online group with 25 bi+ participants. Our participants revealed the presence of intracommunity power dynamics that have roots in offline environments, but which manifest differently in and are exacerbated by the local sociotechnical infrastructure of online social spaces. These power dynamics play out in two distinct types of intragroup conflict: *validity* and

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normative conflicts, and can lead to *latent harms*, or delayed harms that stem from coping strategies. By using power dynamics as a lens to expand our understanding of conflict and harm in online spaces, we identify challenges and opportunities for design work supporting marginalized users.

RELATED WORK

Disentangling Conflict and Harm

Past work in HCI has covered a broad spectrum of harms, from microaggressions [39] to harassment [3, 5], abuse [92], and physical violence [17, 98]. This work has largely treated experiences of conflict and of harm as indistinct. In cases such as outright harassment, this makes sense, as these conflicts are typically one-sided and specifically intended to harm a specific target [5, 68, 78]. However, intracommunity conflict is often two-sided and sometimes unintentional [54]. Treating conflict and harm as the same experience can lead us to misunderstand the dynamics of both. Here, we disentangle these concepts.

Conflict refers to *disagreement between parties* and is an immutable property of social interaction [37, 67]. By contrast, definitions of harm center on the entity in question being in a worse position than before an action was taken [77]. This focus on a worsened outcome is consistent with common use in HCI, but newer conceptualizations of harm add a relational component, which accounts for whether the harmed party has the option to resist the harm and whether their resistance will prevent negative consequences [51]. A **harm**, therefore, is not simply a negative thing that occurs, but *a negative thing that occurs and cannot be resisted*. This suggests that we should examine the relational component of how harm is related to the ability to take action.

Defining **power** as *the ability to take action* [23, 46], **power dynamics**, then, are the *differences in ability to take action between parties*. Differences in power are shaped by interactions between societal structure and individual context [23]. Those who are in one situation oppressed can, in other situations, oppress others [20, 22]. While larger societal structures act to oppress all members of the LGBTQ+ community [48], subgroups of the community who have more, though still limited or constrained, privilege (e.g. legal rights and cultural representation) can act to oppress groups with less societal power within the community [34, 48, 50].

In addition to the functions of power which may result in immediate harms, power dynamics also act to limit access to agency and resources [41]. This lack of access limits one's ability to resist or reduce harm [51]. Conflict, then, turns to harm when power dynamics limit the oppressed party's agency and access to resources to the point where they cannot reduce or resist the negative impacts of the conflict.

Bi+ Experiences of Harm as Context

In their work with transgender communities, Scheuerman et al. [91] suggested a typology of harms which we employ here to draw relevant distinctions between *insider* and *outsider* harm. Insider harms are committed by members of the same affinity group, while outsider harm represents harm from outside the affinity group [91]. Insider harms have been identified in other contexts, such as women on location-based dating apps [86], or children with autism in online communities [89]. Further developing the concept of insider harms to understand how they are amplified or manifest differently in online social spaces will help us understand how to build more supportive online spaces that do not continue to marginalize already marginalized groups.

The bi+ community is a relevant starting point for exploring insider harms, considering well-documented tensions with the larger LGBTQ+ population [38, 39, 40]. Many of these tensions are enabled by homonormativity, or an approach to understanding the LGBTQ+ community which relies on traditional sex and gender binaries to provide a parallel, as opposed to alternate, social structure to heterosexuality [94]. This homonormative approach was adopted by leadership within the LGBTQ+ community to frame policy changes and pushes for social acceptance as non-threatening to heterosexuals [59]. However, it produced the unfortunate side-effect of enabling an interpretation of this standard whereby the further an expression of sexuality or gender varies from this homonormative model, the less authentic or legitimate it is believed to be by some members of the LGBTQ+ community [13]. In turn, this makes it easier for those with homonormative identities (e.g., monosexual gay and lesbian) to dismiss identities such as bi+ [52]. Importantly, these dynamics can be invisible to those whose identities most align with these normative standards, but the exclusionary consequences of this homonormative dynamic can be traumatic for those whose identities lie outside the norm, including bi+ people [52]. This leads to three relevant and frequent harms experienced by bi+ people: stigmatization, invalidation, and erasure.

Stigmatization occurs when a harmful stereotype is broadly applied to a certain group, becoming part of the public perception of that group [44]. This results in negative reactions to the group [44] and mistreatment of individuals in the group [103]. Bi+ people are often stigmatized as confused about their identity, promiscuous, greedy, and carriers of sexually-transmitted infections [1, 7, 60]. These stereotypes are the basis of stigmatization from broader society as well as from the rest of the LGBTQ+ community [99]. This stigmatization, enacted as social exclusion, oversexualization, and mistrust, is harmful to mental health, especially when delivered by members of the larger LGBTQ+ community [2, 38, 39, 69].

Invalidation is the denial that a piece of one's core identity is legitimate. This problem that faces bi+ individuals is a major source of conflict with the larger LGBTQ+ community [11, 40, 49]. Invalidation often takes the form of insistence that bisexuality is simply a stage or an attempt to get attention [11, 38, 39, 49]. It also takes the form of debate over whether bi+ people "count" as part of the LGBTQ+ community [11, 48, 99]. Being told one's identity is not "real" has long-term

negative impacts on bi+ wellbeing, including the disruption of self-concept and identity development [14, 81].

Erasure is arguably the most pervasive problem facing bi+ people and has the potential to exacerbate the previous two issues. Erasure captures how bi+ people lack representation in both culture [55, 90] and policy [105]. This results in a lack of familiarity within larger society, which in turn prevents the normalization and legitimation of the identity in the public eye [34]. This continuing erasure, regardless of source, further entrenches stigmatizing stereotypes in the general population and feelings of isolation, marginalization, and invalidation in bi+ individuals specifically [53].

METHODS

We employed an Asynchronous Remote Community (ARC), using a secret Facebook group and weekly elicitations to sustain engagement while allowing flexibility for participants [65, 66, 87]. ARC has previously been used to engage with populations where face-to-face methods may be difficult because of population distribution [64] or stigmatization [66]. Our ARC included 25 participants, eliciting reflections on experiences in LGBTQ+ online social spaces over 8 weeks. We then followed up with individual interviews. Procedures were approved by our Institutional Review Board. We followed Charmaz's guidelines for constructivist grounded theory as an analysis method [16].

Participants

We recruited participants through Facebook advertisements targeted to users 18 years old and older living in the United States, who had been identified as interested in "Bisexual community" or "Pansexuality." Additional recruiting materials were distributed through the authors' personal networks and posts in subcommunities on Reddit (e.g., r/bisexual, r/bibros), with the permission of the moderators.

We asked respondents to the study's advertisements to self-identify key characteristics which are known to have effects on LGBTQ+ identity. This included sexual orientation [99], age [25], gender identity [35], race [10], and population density of where people grew up and currently live [45]. Participants were selected based on Trost's non-representative stratified sampling technique, which aims to ensure sample diversity on characteristics considered relevant to the population in question [95]. Participants ranged from 18 to 45 years old (M=28.5, SD=8.1). Our sample was 8% Black, 16% Asian, 20% multiracial, and 56% white, as well as 36% cisgender women, 16% cisgender men, 4% transgender women, 16% transgender men, and 28% nonbinary. 32% of participants reported either having spent their childhood in a rural environment or living in a rural environment now. For full participant details see Supplemental Materials Appendix A.

Procedure

As with previous ARC studies [65, 66], we used a secret Facebook group as the site for our ARC. While Facebook currently has multiple privacy-related issues and LGBTQ+-related problems (e.g., a real name policy which can negatively impact trans people), it is also currently the most commonly used platform with the broadest demographic reach [85]. Alternative platforms, such as Reddit and Twitter have significantly less penetration in the general population and specific participation deficits along racial, gender, socioeconomic, and urban/rural divide lines [85]. Locating this study on Facebook provided infrastructure for online groups and minimized the need to familiarize participants with a new system [64, 65, 66, 87]. All of our participants had existing Facebook accounts which they used to participate in the study, keeping platform-related risks consistent with the risks participants assume by using Facebook in the first place. After completing our informed consent procedure and agreeing to a code of conduct (see Supplemental Materials Appendix B), participants were invited to join the group. We began the study with 28 participants, and 3 participants withdrew within the first 2 weeks of the study, a pattern of attrition and participation in line with previous ARC studies [66, 87].

Participants responded to and engaged with each other's responses to 8 weekly prompts designed to elicit responses from participants about their experiences in online LGBTQ+ spaces. Activities used elicitation methods ranging from validated scales and writing to visual elicitation through drawing and photography and engagement with interface prototypes. For a summary of activities and motivations for employing these activities, see Table 1; for additional reflection on the design and outcomes of these activities, see Supplemental Materials Appendix D. A research assistant monitored the group to ensure compliance with the code of conduct, ask follow-up questions to elicit additional detail, and promote engagement from the rest of the participants.

In the final two weeks of the study, we interviewed participants via Facebook Messenger text chat. Text-based interviewing can have challenges around recruiting, learning the chat software, and lack of rapport [80]. We mitigated these limitations by placing the interview at the end of the 8-week period, on the same platform as the rest of the study. Interviews ranged from 44 minutes to 1 hour and 38 minutes (M=1h7m, SD=14m). The interviews correspond with theoretical sampling in the grounded theory tradition [16]. We elicited additional detail based on trends established in the first part of the study, validating and further investigating emergent analytic concepts while member-checking our interpretations. The interview protocols were semi-structured and all participants were interviewed. Participants were compensated $25 for completing 6 of the 8 weeks of prompts, and $25 for completing the follow-up interview.

Analysis

Analysis began concurrently with data collection. The study team engaged in an ongoing process of open coding and memo writing via Dedoose. Throughout data gathering and analysis, the research team met regularly to ensure reflection of emergent lines of inquiry by comparing codes and memos,

Activity	Motivation	P.R.
Introductions: Introduce yourself (name, pronouns), tell the group about who had the most influence on your bi+ identity. Privately (via secure Qualtrics form) respond to scales related to LGBTQ+ experience and web skills.	Icebreaker to build trust between participants via shared experiences, supporting later co-construction of knowledge [57]. Scales relevant to bi+ identity [33, 74, 84] and relationship to LGBTQ+ community, plus self-monitoring ability [62] and web skills [47] for comparative baseline per-participant.	100%
Visual Elicitation: Draw a picture of how/where you represent your attraction to more than one gender differently in different spaces online.	Visual elicitation [56] to ground participants in their own ecosystem and experiences, and highlight relevant differences in experiences across platforms/affordance sets.	96%
Negative Experiences: Share times where you did not feel supported/welcome in interacting with the LGBTQ+ community online as a bi+ person, including what characteristics of the group that either helped you feel more or less supported.	Examine type and tenor of negative online interactions with the larger LGBTQ+ community, with a focus on identifying characteristics of online spaces that may foster intracommunity friction which impacts bi+ people.	96%
Photo Album: Build a small photo/screenshot album which reflects how you represent your relationships as a bi+ person.	Examine participant approaches to disclosure of bi+ identity online while engaging in a non-writing response modality to support participants who are less comfortable with writing [56].	96%
Interface Critique: Give feedback on 3 interface designs for social media profile building/onboarding. Interfaces varied on aspects of the user experience commonly flagged as problematic for LGBTQ+ users.	Using interface walkthrough techniques [4], examine how different affordances for presenting bi+ identity are perceived and evaluated by bi+ users.	92%
Positive Experiences: Share times when you were supported/welcome in interacting with the LGBTQ+ community online as a bi+ person, including characteristics of the group that either helped you feel more or less supported.	Examine type and tenor of positive online interactions with the larger LGBTQ+ community, with a focus on identifying characteristics of online spaces that lessen bi+ tension with the larger community.	92%
Online to Offline: Share times when prior experiences representing yourself as bi+ online impacted how you represent yourself as bi+ offline.	Probing the connection between online and offline interactions to understand how online experiences may influence offline interactions [79].	88%
Reflection: Reflect by either directly reflecting on your participation and what you learned, or writing a letter to a powerful figure in social media (e.g, a platform CEO) and explaining to them how to better support bi+ users.	Reflective synthesis of individual participant experiences in the study to begin identifying larger themes and generating direct design- and policy-relevant suggestions.	80%

Table 1: Short activity descriptions and methodological motivations for weekly ARC activities. Righthand column indicates participation rate for each week's activity. For full details and original prompt language, see Supplemental Materials Appendix C.

discussing emerging themes, and enacting additional theoretical sampling via adjusting data collection (e.g., adjusting the wording on an initially-general prompt to elicit more information about a specific phenomena). All probe activities were included in our analysis, and our findings are all based on triangulation across multiple weekly responses and follow-up responses in the individualized interviews.

As Charmaz suggests [16], final analysis was conducted via multiple rounds of coding. Open coding began during data collection and continued into the beginning of our analysis period, with the research team inductively tagging recurring concepts in the data set. Focused coding proceeded after the team reached consensus regarding the most relevant larger concepts and tensions in our dataset and included elements of axial and theoretical coding, which, respectively, relate codes to subcodes and to existing literature [16], confirming external and construct validity. At this point we integrated prior work on harm into our analysis.

The research team then conducted confirmatory coding to ensure the themes and relationships identified were consistent with the existing data set, which led to another round of theoretical sampling on the data to further analyze emergent power dynamics. A final round of focused coding and memoing was then conducted by the authors and an additional research assistant to confirm the broad applicability of these emergent themes.

Position Statement

Our interpretation of the data is informed by the relative positionality of the research team [16]. Our analysis was performed by the authors, both of whom are member researchers for this population, with the assistance of two undergraduate research assistants, one of whom is a member researcher, and one who is not and underwent formal LGBTQ+ ally training for research personnel provided by our university. All members of the research team are regularly active in online spaces and have been for 5+ years.

RESULTS

Bi+ individuals often experience tension with the larger LGBTQ+ community [99, 101], a dynamic that has translated from an offline to an online context [9]. Although many of our participants ultimately felt that their time in online LGBTQ+ social spaces was a net positive in their lives, they all reported some level of harm around their bi+ identities in these spaces.

Often our participants, and therefore our results, referred to a broader, non bi+ LGBTQ+ community when pointing out problematic dynamics. It is crucial to note that neither our participant data nor our analysis are meant to introduce or reinforce broad assumptions about all non-bi+ LGBTQ+ people. As Collins' matrix of domination illustrates [19], the overall position of all LGBTQ+ people in a societal matrix of oppression is a marginalized one. Drawing on Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, which illustrates the shifting, contextual nature of power dynamics as applied to specific social circumstances within a larger matrix of domination [23], we focus on the experiences of bi+ users to better understand how societal structures of homonormativity are encoded in local, sociotechnical online contexts. Our participants, and the authors, recognize that those who harm bi+ people in the following account have complex identities, as we ourselves do, and may be harmfully marginalized in other ways while still responsible for harms to bi+ people.

Intracommunity Conflict Within Online LGBTQ+ Spaces

Bi+ people encounter two categories of conflict, which we call *validity conflicts* and *normative conflicts*. *Validity conflicts* center around whether someone is considered a part of the LGBTQ+ community, and therefore as part of the online space. *Normative conflicts* center around how identity is explained or expressed, such as disagreements over correct terminology. Power dynamics are key to escalating both types of conflict into harm, but in different ways.

Validity Conflicts

Validity conflicts take the form of gatekeeping behaviors, with people in positions of relative privilege (in this case, proximity to homonormativity) within a group questioning the legitimacy of the other party's identity and their right to access the LGBTQ+ online space. Validity conflicts are rooted in the societal structure of homonormativity and how proximity to power is enacted through the local sociotechnical infrastructure of online spaces. For example, the majority of our participants felt a lack of acceptance from a larger LGBTQ+ community in terms of their bi+ identities, with groups with relatively more societal power frequently questioning the validity of bi+ identities. As P23 recounted, this identity-based gatekeeping behavior can make bi+ individuals feel excluded and erased from online spaces while also harming bi+ individuals' own internal sense of validity:

> … both of my identities (bi and nonbinary) are subject to a very particular kind of erasure from within queer spaces. There are binary trans people who think nonbinary people are fake; there are queer people who think bi people are fake; there's not really a place of safety around my validity.

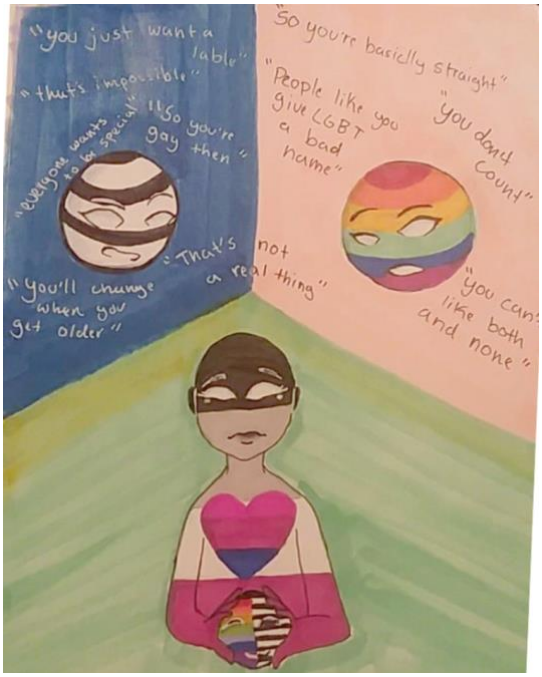

Figure 1: P15's response to our week 2 visual elicitation prompt, showing lack of acceptance from multiple communities.

P23 explained that a "place of safety," or place where they do not have to defend their identity or right to exist, is essentially nonexistent. For both sexual orientation and gender identity there is always a group with relatively more societal power questioning the validity of those identities and P23's right to be part of these online spaces.

More powerful actors can also enact gatekeeping via stereotyping, sometimes in conjunction with invalidation and demands to justify one's own orientation. Consider P5, who initially turned to women-loving-women-specific online LGBTQ+ spaces for support, but was instead met with derision and stereotypes from a dominant group of lesbians:

> Despite [lesbians'] self-proclaimed message of inclusivity, they often have a somewhat condescending or pretentious tone towards people like me. I've had girls who expressed outright disgust at me for being attracted to men, as if it somehow meant I find women inferior.

As a result of this type of gatekeeping behavior, P5 felt that those with more homonormative identities (in this case, lesbians) repeatedly questioned if P5's identity was valid, as if an attraction to men made them less a part of the LGBTQ+ community or somehow negated their attraction to women. Despite the fact that P5 had some positive interactions in these groups, this gatekeeping behavior left P5 on the defensive, feeling that they must closely monitor even their manner of speech when responding to such critiques:

> I'm not allowed to be simply upset, I must always prepare and articulate my words in a manner that doesn't let anyone interject before I'm done. Which is somewhat exhausting.

This constitutes two layers of harm. To exist in these spaces P5 must constantly defend the validity of their identity, and to keep participating in the group, they must do so in a manner that does not offend those with more societal power.

Not all exercises of this gatekeeping power are subtle. For example, P15 is genderfluid, biromantic and asexual (someone who feels romantic, but not necessarily sexual, attraction to more than one gender, and whose gender identity fluctuates). They report outright demands to "choose a side" from bisexuals (who take issue with the combination of biromanticism and asexuality), binary trans individuals (who take issue with genderfluidity), and other asexuals (who take issue with biromanticism). P15 feels attacked from all directions, as shown in their illustration of their feelings on the issue (see Fig 1). P15 told us that even moderators appear to believe that it is reasonable for people to question the validity of their identity, leaving no recourse to resist or mitigate these attacks. In this case, it is bisexual people who have the proximate relationship to homonormativity as more prominent and publicly valid than biromantic asexuals. As such, bisexuals can also gatekeep. It is not that lesbians and gay men are unusually interested in targeting bisexuals specifically; it is that the power to gatekeep potentially breeds exclusion when the local sociotechnical infrastructure invests those who already had relatively more societal power with the tools to do so.

Normative Conflicts

Normative conflicts are disagreements between parties that recognize the validity of each other's identities, but disagree about how these identities should be expressed. These conflicts may be exacerbated by the decontextualizing nature of online spaces themselves [83] and the local sociotechnical infrastructure of the group (e.g., to even form a group, certain community members need to take on administrative/moderation powers with a banning and blocking-focused toolset and expectations).

Most of our participants encountered this kind of conflict at some point during their time in online spaces, often directed at new community members still forming their identity. P2 shared their perspective as someone who had seen this as both a moderator and a regular group member:

> There was a tendency to be heavy-handed in calling out new people who were understandably struggling with the language. I would try to steer such incidents toward a positive 'calling-in' or what have you. For instance I'd offer something like "hi, welcome to the group, and thank you for sharing this about yourself. we're here to listen and help! can you clarify what you mean when you say you think you are attracted to males and females?"… but unfortunately there were others who were louder and more zealous in their approach, and it would invariably lead to hurt feelings and a rather stressful online environment.

As a regular group member, P2 did not have tools to defuse normative conflicts which clearly stemmed from misunderstandings and, if handled properly, presented an opportunity to educate and support newer group members in claiming their identity in an acceptable way. As a result, the conflicts turned to harm, with the "winner" determined by who was more effective at arguing in an online group.

We saw this dynamic play out in our own ARC, when conflict erupted between P23 and P25. In response to our first prompt, P25 described herself as being "equally attracted to both males and females," which prompted P23 to object. P23, who is nonbinary, stated their discomfort with the "males and females" language, as it asserts a gender binary, and centers sex rather than gender. P25 responded with a clarification that she was attracted to individuals who present either strongly masculine or feminine.

In response to Week 3's prompt about negative experiences in online LGBTQ+ spaces, P25 revisited this issue by writing about her Week 1 experience. She felt her "personal preferences" were frequently questioned and delegitimized by LGBTQ+ communities and emphasized feeling exhausted and frustrated from constantly explaining herself in these spaces. P23 responded that they were not bothered by her "personal preferences" but rather by the exclusionary language that she had used to describe them. P25 defended her language choices, particularly the point that using the phrase "both males and females" did not imply a strict binary, while P23 continued to assert that, regardless of intent, this language implicitly rejects nonbinary identities.

This conflict is a typical normative conflict: at no point were P23 or P25 trying to exclude or force anyone from the group. Yet, based on follow up with each participant, they both experienced harm: P23 through fatigue and frustration with feeling obligated to educate people on trans and nonbinary matters, and P25 through feeling invalidated in a space centered on bi+ identities. Both P23 and P25 made assumptions about each other, reflecting one of the classic decontextualizing consequences of online spaces [82], as P3 also noted in their interview:

> Online spaces can get stuck in their [echo] chamber and get discussing micro identity politics, and some things that aren't really issues become issues. Offline, a lot more people are relaxed and just glad to see people like them... [online] nobody takes the time to step back or fact check or see the bigger picture in it.

Here, P3 is noting how normative conflict is exacerbated by the rapid and decontextualized nature of online discourse. Those who believe they have superior knowledge or positionality assert themselves, and by doing so create an environment where normative conflicts are a constant worry, escalate quickly, and lack the direct context, connection, and

cuing which an offline space affords [83] that may help prevent these conflicts from turning to harm as often.

These types of conflicts could be largely solvable, and in fact could be useful educational moments. P2, for example, noted how when they are in a moderator role, they make it a priority to intervene in situations like this, "guiding and making acceptance a priority." However, they also expressed conflict over what the role of a moderator should be here:

> I don't think a healthy role for a mod is language policing. If someone is legitimately struggling with the ever-changing terminology, I think a calm, nonjudgmental explanation is needed, but never a harsh call-out (except in the case of someone deliberately being hurtful).

P2 contrasted this with their general expectation that a moderator's job is primarily to "kick someone out for being blatantly problematic." Here, we see how the fact that moderators primarily act as group security, but are the only ones with the local infrastructural power to effectively intervene in normative conflicts, poses an ongoing problem via a mismatch in role expectations. Unless those with infrastructural moderation power are motivated to take on additional educational labor, these normative conflicts can result in people abandoning groups and their potential for support, instead of becoming learning moments where group members work through conflicts and continue to contribute.

Coping Strategies as Harm

Our participants described coping strategies for responding to these types of conflicts and harms within online LGBTQ+ groups. Power dynamics detailed above largely placed our participants in positions where responses were protective reactions in the moment. These immediate coping mechanisms could also carry a long-term cost by forcing the individual to exclude themselves from sources of social support, including esteem and emotional support, and instrumental support, including informational and tangible support [24]. This can lead to what we call *latent harms*. In addition to the more immediate harms described above, participants' coping strategies resulted in delayed harms, stemming from the same power dynamics as the more immediate harms. We identified three coping strategies which can lead to latent harm: identity flattening, attempts at education, and limiting engagement and leaving.

Identity Flattening

In response to both validity and normative conflicts, participants described a behavior we call identity flattening. We define *identity flattening* as the practice of collapsing down a multifaceted identity into a less complex presentation of identity that the individual believes will be more acceptable within a space. This can be viewed as a special type of conformity behavior where the goal is to avoid the negative consequences of full identification by substituting a less-specific form of one's identity, as opposed to a change in beliefs/self-concept to better conform to group norms that characterizes standard conformity [5]. Participants described this strategy as a way of decreasing the likelihood of identity-based conflict and reducing the need to defend oneself while still highlighting the relevant part of their identity.

Consider how identity flattening plays out in the case of a validity conflict-based harm, the direct invalidation of bi+ identity, as experienced by P12:

> … people [tell] me that I'm really only into girls, when I'm definitely bi/pan… In LGBTQ online spaces I usually focus more on attraction to girls because that's "more gay" and fits in better.

P12 told us that this strategy of focusing exclusively on their attraction to women within online LGBTQ+ spaces, as opposed to their full bisexual identity, reduces friction while interacting in these larger groups. Identity flattening is a shortcut to acceptance in these online spaces, skipping past what used to be a painful argument about the validity of bisexuality. Though P12 identifies quite strongly as bi+, by keeping the bulk of their in-group interactions focused on same-sex attractions, they cultivate increased acceptance.

This collapsing of identity potentially imposes long-term harm by contributing to bi+ erasure (a person who would have been visible proof of bi+ existence is instead coded as a lesbian). There is evidence that being able to claim one's specific, full identity leads to better wellbeing outcomes [12, 100]. This type of harm is problematic for those exploring their identities, as online spaces are now the primary sites of LGBTQ+ identity exploration [43] and anyone pursuing this strategy lacks access to specifically-relevant informational resources, social support, and identity validation.

Attempts at Education

Another coping strategy involves taking on education labor, such as explaining how bisexuality is not transphobic (an ultimately false misreading of "bi" as excluding trans attraction [34]) or providing information about the history of bisexual activism, in hopes of improving the environment for future bi+ people in online LGBTQ+ spaces. However, within this strategy, there is an ever-present tension between the desire to improve a space and the desire to participate in a space without the need to do additional, uncompensated labor while potentially making oneself a target.

This tension is visible in the varied motivations participants described for educating members of an online community. P19 talked about educating out of a basic altruistic desire to improve the environment of a group over time, especially when he witnessed validity conflicts based in stereotyping or stigmatization of bi+ identity. P2, by contrast, described feeling an obligation to educate those engaging in normative conflicts as a more senior and experienced member of the group. P15, meanwhile, often felt forced to educate, noting that they are often the only person with detailed knowledge of their type of identity in LGBTQ+ online spaces, and have even seen moderators fail to intervene in validity and normative conflicts with the expectation that P15 will step in

and do educational work. This obligation, at least initially, continued to weigh on P15 even as the education activity took an active toll on their own psychological health:

> I would be on the brink of tears, or physically exhausted from trying to defend myself and the whole sexuality. I would think back and think what if there was something wrong with me and I just have this burden for the rest of my life.

Employing an education-based strategy becomes harmful when it forces those that are already under great identity-related pressure, and who have minimal relative societal power within the LGBTQ+ community, to perform emotionally-taxing labor to have any hope of improving these online spaces. Our participants were clear: this educational labor is not simply providing information. It is confronting those who have invalidated bi+ identity or have limited ways of presenting it, and it takes a toll on the educator. Many of our participants described only educating on a temporary basis due to the toll it takes and the amount of extra labor it requires. Attempts to educate often give way to our last strategy: limiting engagement and leaving.

Limiting Engagement and Leaving

Often, especially in accounts from participants with a longer tenure in LGBTQ+ online spaces, we see individuals limiting engagement in groups after periods of direct engagement in validity conflicts or of intense education efforts as a result of normative conflicts. This suggests that this strategy may also be tied to fatigue associated with managing the kinds of conflicts we have described above.

As an example, P8 became more secure in zirs[1] own identity, the costs of engaging in most online LGBTQ+ spaces started to outweigh the benefits due to constant pressure to justify zir and zir wife's identity within the LGBTQ+ community:

> Since I'm male-passing and my primary partner is a cis femme womyn, my relationship looks straight. I'm still queer. She gets challenged because she "doesn't look queer." Because I'm also attracted to cis men, my queerness gets questioned because I'm AFAB [assigned female at birth]. It's gotten to the point where I don't even engage… tbh I'm too old and tired and gay to have to keep validating myself to anyone else.

Similarly, P27 became highly selective about the online groups he engaged with after repeated instances in general LGBTQ+ spaces of group members asserting that "bisexual men were just too scared to come out of the closet all of the way, that they would be 'gay one day'", coupled with instances in which he saw closeted bi+ men outed in these groups as a way to "prove" they were actually gay. P26 also limited her engagement and noted that this was a direct response to a power dynamic she had witnessed in general LGBTQ+ online spaces. P26 perceives what they call "White Gays™," defined as "a cis white gay guy who isn't actually very interested in equality for all people and just focused on himself," as having outsized power in larger LGBTQ+ groups. P26 now avoids many online groups to limit her contact and conflicts with the "White Gays™." In all of these cases, the participants have removed themselves from spaces where societal power dynamics endemic to validity conflict occurs. They opt out of these LGBTQ+ spaces to avoid subgroups with the societal power to gatekeep.

This limiting behavior serves as a means to avoid normative conflicts. Recall P2's attempts to employ an educational strategy to try to defuse normative conflicts. After some time pursuing this strategy unsuccessfully, he had to stop and ultimately leave. Without infrastructural support for his attempts at education, P2 could not effectively prevent certain elements of the group from harshly asserting a "correct" way to express identity – a situation P2, after putting in significant effort, could no longer tolerate.

Limiting the type of spaces that one is engaged with is a protective strategy with clear immediate benefits. However, as with the other strategies, longer-term harms may result. As with identity flattening, erasure continues to be an issue, as all of these participants are no longer visibly bi+ in spaces where validity conflicts occur, and no longer helping to create space for multiple kinds of bi+ identity expression in spaces where normative conflicts occur, leading to less agency and access to resources for bi+ people over time.

This limiting and leaving behavior can also be motivated by witnessing or hearing about, instead of directly experiencing, conflict. P26 has rarely been attacked for her bisexual identity, but feels its impacts nonetheless:

> There are issues of seeing biphobic things posted on all different types of social media - posts upholding negative stereotypes, or saying bisexuality isn't real/valid or that it is transphobic, seeing people say on dating sites they won't date bisexual people, etc. These types of posts generally serve to either a) make me less out [or ensure] withdrawal from those spaces OR b) interact with them in an attempt to educate.

Despite the lack of a direct negative encounter, these conflicts are very real for P26, and she reacts accordingly. Many other participants also reported withdrawing in response to homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic posts. These reasonable reactions lead to a compounding of all the long-term harms we have mentioned here. Because those acting proactively to protect themselves never join certain LGBTQ+ spaces, and those who experience harm end up leaving LGBTQ+ spaces, people with bi+ identities end up further erased from the community. In turn, this erasure has the potential to compound the existing power dynamics, as those left to speak for the online LGBTQ+ space are those who already had relatively more societal power.

[1] Throughout our reporting, we employ the pronouns our participants use for themselves.

DISCUSSION

By examining intracommunity conflict that a bi+ population encounters in LGBTQ+ online spaces, and how bi+ people respond to these conflicts, we show how intracommunity power dynamics play out within online spaces for marginalized groups. Our first research question (RQ1) asked about the types of intracommunity conflicts and harms that bi+ individuals face in online spaces. We found that bi+ people face two categories of conflict: *validity conflicts*, based in challenges to the validity of bi+ identity by those with relatively more societal power, and *normative conflicts*, based in disagreements over the acceptable way to express identity, often exacerbated by the local sociotechnical infrastructure. Second, we asked how bi+ individuals respond to these conflicts (RQ2), and found coping strategies with the potential to turn into long-term *latent harm*.

Extending Insider Harms

We extend Scheuerman et al.'s typology of harms by adding a distinction between *latent* and *immediate* harms in online spaces. Doing so adds a temporal dimension to our conception of online harms enabling us to better understand harms that may not be immediately apparent. *Immediate harms* are tightly coupled to the conflict they stem from and encompass many of the harms previously studied in HCI, such as trolling and harassment [5, 17, 26]. Our participants demonstrated the relevance of immediate harms when studying online spaces for marginalized groups, recounting encounters with stereotyping, exclusion from groups, and challenges to expression of identity.

In contrast, we propose the concept of *latent harms*, or those not tightly coupled to conflict due to a delay in negative effect or action through a secondary mechanism, such as a pervasively harmful set of norms or expectations imposed on those being harmed. This type of harm is particularly insidious as it can stem from one's own protective behaviors, appearing at first to be a positive, adaptive coping strategy. In the case of all of the coping strategies we have discussed, latent harm develops over the long term in the form of lack of access to support, resources, and representation, which has impacts on the mental and physical health of bi+ people [15, 36, 72, 88].

This distinction provides a useful tool for further investigating the temporal dimension of harm, especially insider harms, which may be more difficult to see immediately and take longer for the impacts to manifest in contrast with outsider harms. For designers and researchers alike, it may be tempting to focus primarily on immediate harms. However, to account for all harms in our studies and in our designs, the existence, prevalence, and potential severity of these longer-term, more subtle latent harms should be better accounted for.

Power Dynamics and Intracommunity Conflict

As we have seen in our results, intracommunity power dynamics, whether societal or based in local sociotechnical infrastructure, can push both *validity* and *normative conflict* in an online space for marginalized people into insider harm. This progression from conflict to harm operates differently for each type of conflict, suggesting that we must investigate not just harms, but their precipitating conflicts and associated power dynamics, to identify root causes and solutions.

Validity conflicts often stem from power dynamics which are not exclusive to online spaces; rather, they are based in larger dynamics within LGBTQ+ communities [42, 99, 101]. As Scheuerman et al. document, based on work by Dourish [31], online spaces are socially constructed and therefore can reproduce offline societal power structures. This does appear to be the case for validity conflicts, which see offline, societal power dynamics replicated in an online space and then potentially made worse by giving already-dominant subgroups formalized, explicit power over a whole group, along with a set of technical tools for enforcing this power.

This is what happened to P15. Despite people attacking their identity, moderators refused to intervene, communicating to the group that this was acceptable behavior, and that those with less accepted identities were expected to take on the labor of educating the group if they wanted to remain in a space. Power dynamics shape how much access a person has to the kinds of resources they need to effectively resist harms [73]. In this case, the power dynamics of a particular group left P15 without the ability to resist via the only tool for doing so we currently provide to groups: appealing to the moderation team. This inability to resist is embedded in the very power dynamic which moves P15's validity conflicts into outright harm. Without this ability to resist, P15 and others turn to an ultimately maladaptive coping strategy, moving conflict into a latent harm that is difficult to account for, or the limiting/leaving coping strategy which worsens bi+ erasure, further entrenching the power dynamic.

Normative conflicts often stem from power dynamics which are based in problems native to online spaces. Online spaces do have differences from offline spaces, including how trust is established in online communities differently from offline contexts [82], as well as the skill- and access-based power dynamics embedded in the use of technology itself [29]. Conflict escalates to harm here through what might be best characterized as a process of "talking past each other," in which the reduced-cues environment fails to provide opportunities for constructive reconciliation, and there is no infrastructurally-defined role for countering this environmental deficit. For example, based on prior literature [83], the lack of context and reduced access to emotional cues in the argument between P23 and P25 likely helped escalate that conflict to harm, and P2's experiences trying to manage these conflicts show us how the current moderator role is not particularly set up for intervening in this kind of conflict, allowing conflict to escalate to harm.

This distinction between *validity* and *normative* conflicts is a tool for not only understanding the types of conflict that impact bi+ people, but also for thinking through how different types of conflict escalate into harm.

Challenges for Design

Our findings point to two challenges to grapple with in future work. First, there is a need to account for not only how populations are marginalized by larger society, but also how relational power dynamics are embedded within communities. Centering the perspectives of marginalized communities is an important first step in decreasing harm in online spaces [28, 71, 91], but this is not enough to build systems that can account for harms that unfold within communities. Inspired by Crenshaw [22, 23], we ask designers to consider how sociotechnical systems can reify and amplify power dynamics, recognizing that one must also understand how insider harms propagate in online spaces to support the most marginalized. Specifically, we urge designers to examine how their current group toolsets may enable validity conflict by reifying offline power dynamics.

Second, we need to disentangle harm from conflict. Technical solutions should address the conflicts that potential harms stem from and prevent conflict from turning to harm. We must recognize that harms are not always tightly coupled to precipitating conflicts. As we see with latent harms, it may take some time for harms to manifest, requiring technical solutions that look past the present moment. While similar harms can be the end result of both types of conflict, the mechanisms (here, power dynamics) that escalate conflict to harm differ. As such, multiple solutions to prevent the same kind of harm may be needed based on the type of precipitating conflict. For example, the latent harm of prolonged and contentious educational work stemming from normative conflict, could be prevented via a system that helps moderators identify educational needs and distribute the labor. However, if this same type of harm stems from a situation like P15's, who faced validity conflicts from all sides that moderators did not see as harms, the moderation team would have no use for this kind of system, as the problem is the composition of the moderation team itself. Here, diversifying the moderation team and providing tools for resolving disagreements could be more appropriate.

These challenges show the potential of moderation to help alleviate harms. Most current tools for dealing with conflict online focus on bad actors, including banning or blocking individual users. However, these tools can exacerbate harms that arise from intracommunity conflicts, especially if a larger societal power dynamic puts the tools in the hands of the already powerful. Banning or muting may not only be too harsh in situations where no one is acting in bad faith, but may also exacerbate latent harm arising from erasure.

We recommend designing tools to deal with insider and latent harms specifically, such as alternatives to bans and mutes. Relatedly, expanding sociotechnical moderation infrastructure to reflect the differences between insider and more traditionally-accounted-for outsider harms will require new tools and policies. For example, a new "educator-moderator" role could focus not on bans and policing, but on turning conflict productive while compensating, rewarding and formally empowering marginalized individuals for what would, under the current system, have been forced labor followed by self-erasure. A toolset for this role could temporarily hide posts and sandbox new users until an educator-moderator can have a conversation with them and certify them as ready for full participation, similar to strategies deployed in other contexts such as Wikipedia [18, 76]. Additionally, formalizing this role makes it compatible with a large body of related toolsets for activists [96] and therapists [97] which could be used for training on topics such as the unique characteristics of online conflicts [82] and their escalation, and better practices to prevent burnout.

Limitations and Future Work

This study has several limitations. First, while the process we have described around latent harms is supported by our participant data and the psychology literature in this area [2, 15, 72], with participants in later stages of identity formation and with longer tenure in LGBTQ+ spaces noting this progression explicitly, longitudinal follow-up is necessary to better understand long-term latent harms. Second, though we believe these results are transferrable to other contexts, additional work is needed to confirm how these dynamics might play out in other marginalized communities and in adjacent offline contexts. Notably, our data strongly suggests that many of the issues we have written about here also apply to individuals with nonbinary gender identities, suggesting this is a fruitful area for future work. Finally, our study is scoped to the US cultural context, and research is necessary to understand how cultural influence may impact understandings of conflict, power dynamics, and harm, as well as different perspectives that prioritize other kinds of power dynamics, such as race and socioeconomic status.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed an extended model of conflict and harm in online spaces and how harms stem from dynamics based in societal and local sociotechnical infrastructural power. In doing so, we show how marginalized subgroups within online communities still have unequal access to the benefits of these spaces. However, this paper is not intended as an attack on these spaces. Our participants spoke of how important these spaces can be. This belief in the positive potential of these spaces is shared by the authors, who have benefited from online LGBTQ+ spaces despite encountering the issues described here. By interrogating power dynamics and intracommunity conflicts, these spaces can become more welcoming to those that need them the most.

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