

“A Source of Hope Online”: Membership Curation by Staff to Protect Guarded Cliques Limits Access to Resources for Marginalized Communities on Discord

ERIKA MELDER, Northeastern University, USA

EMMA VONBUELOW, Northeastern University, USA

ADA LERNER, Northeastern University, USA

MICHAEL ANN DEVITO, Northeastern University, USA

The Discord platform allows marginalized people access to critical communities and resources unavailable elsewhere. Discord server staff often protect these communities through **membership curation**, which encompasses acts intended to deny or gate server access to certain users. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, we interviewed fourteen Discord staff members to better understand the tensions between membership curation and open access to communities and resources. We found that excessive curation promotes a pattern of insular, atomized **guarded cliques**, which jeopardizes access to critical Discord spaces for marginalized users who clash with cultural or group norms, sometimes translating into severe offline harms. We determined that membership curation often functions as resistance against cultural change, and it is also used to minimize the need for active moderation. Based on these findings, we offer a series of transferable design recommendations and best practices for both the Discord platform and for server staff.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing**; • **Collaborative and social computing**; • **Collaborative and social computing theory, concepts and paradigms**; • **Social networks**; • **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**;

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1 Introduction

The Discord platform allows users to create and join online communities known as *servers*, which provide spaces to discuss select topics with visibility limited to only members of the server. This means that, while Discord is technically a centralized platform, individual server staff have significantly more control over their spaces compared to similar platforms, placing significant power and responsibility into the hands of admins. This semi-private, locally-controlled structure makes Discord particularly well-suited for marginalized users, who can use the power afforded to Discord

Authors' Contact Information: [Erika Melder](#), Khoury College of Computer Sciences, Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA, melder.e@northeastern.edu; [Emma Vonbuelow](#), Khoury College of Computer Sciences, Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA, vonbuelow.e@northeastern.edu; [Ada Lerner](#), Khoury College of Computer Sciences, Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA, ada@ccs.neu.edu; [Michael Ann DeVito](#), Khoury College of Computer Sciences, Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA, m.devito@northeastern.edu.



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administrators to help defend against harassment and abuse, allowing them to more safely build communities centered around marginalized identity and decide on appropriate resources and support [11, 29]. This is especially valuable since many marginalized people face difficulty finding communities elsewhere, for reasons such as physical distance [21, 22] or harassment on more public online platforms [17, 36, 37]. Therefore, Discord functions as a crucial lifeline to communities and resources for these users. Importantly, retaining access to these communities and resources is contingent on remaining a member of the server which offers them, and losing this access can result in severe consequences, such as those outlined in this participant vignette:

TwoFortyThree¹, a trans woman, wanted to find housing with other trans people, seeking safety among her own community. To do this, she opened Discord – a semi-private instant messaging platform that lets users create individually run, locally moderated instances – and joined a server with listings for local housing. She quickly found a roommate, and she was optimistic. However, some of the other people on the server, including her new roommate, regularly posted misogynistic opinions and rhetoric that made her uncomfortable. When she spoke up against it, she faced severe backlash, culminating in a physical altercation with her new roommate. She ended up losing her apartment. The admins on the housing server were faced with a choice: should they allow her to stay in their community, or remove her and instead let her former roommate stay? In the end, it came down to personal relationships – her ex-roommate was close friends with server staff members, while she was not. The admins turned on her, threatening that they would use their connections to sabotage her career. In an instant, what was once a necessary resource had been cut off, turned into a vector for harassment and abuse.

This vignette describes the experience of TwoFortyThree, a trans woman who joined Discord to look for trans-inclusive housing, only to be cut off from the housing resource after clashing with the predominant culture of a longstanding clique. As a result, TwoFortyThree ended up losing her housing and becoming the victim of threats. She, like many marginalized users, relied on Discord for access to safe communities and critical resources, and faced serious offline harms when that access was revoked.

While there are many cases like TwoFortyThree's, where losing access to crucial spaces begets harm, server admins and moderators must also proactively protect these spaces to maintain their usefulness, which requires being selective about who has access and revoking access to those who are perceived as threatening the space. We refer to this process as **membership curation**. The necessity of membership curation generates tension between the goals of keeping a critical space open to those who need it, and keeping it closed to those who would put it at risk. This raises the questions which guide this work: what are the effects of membership curation on Discord, and how might we begin to address some of this tension to minimize the impacts of membership curation decisions on some of Discord's most vulnerable users?

This paper uses interviews with Discord users holding a variety of server management roles, including admins, moderators, and community managers, to investigate the motivations for membership curation on Discord, the mechanisms by which membership curation occurs, and the consequences of membership curation for some of Discord's most marginalized communities, such as losing access to the critical communities and resources hosted on Discord servers. We center our investigation on the experiences of marginalized communities to better understand how membership curation coincides with the elevated importance that marginalized users place on Discord communities. To investigate, we conducted interviews with fourteen Discord staff

¹To protect participants' privacy while preserving their epistemic authority, participants were allowed to select their own pseudonyms for this paper. No pseudonym used here represents the actual name or online identity/handle of any participant, but all pseudonyms respect the participant's authority over how they wish to be referenced. We elaborate on this decision in Section 3.2.

members of various roles and identities. Our approach is rooted in constructivist grounded theory [7, 8], where insights from interviews inform future lines of inquiry and lead to emergent results. Our work was guided by the following questions:

1. How does membership curation on Discord affect marginalized users' access to critical resources and communities on the platform?
2. What factors contribute to the need for membership curation practices, and the forms those practices take?

We find that membership curation is performed not only through explicit server management actions, but also through social pressure from **guarded cliques** of members. Furthermore, we find that this form of membership curation is self-reinforcing because it selects for members who conform to the same ideals as established members, resulting in lack of access and subsequent harms to users who cannot or do not meet the social criteria imposed by server staff. In particular, we find elevated disadvantages for LGBTQ+ users, who often heavily rely on Discord communities more for access to critical resources and require additional layers of protection for their communities because of their identities, exacerbating this phenomenon. Furthermore, we find that membership curation can serve to assert cultural homogeneity in the face of external cultural pressure, and thus functions as a resistance to social change from new users. We conclude that membership curation is a reactive response to the perception that Discord prioritizes server growth over admins' ability to independently manage smaller, more isolated communities. Based on these findings, we offer a set of design recommendations for developers of semiprivate platforms such as Discord and best practices for community staff members intended to help minimize the risk of harm for marginalized users.

2 Background and prior work

2.1 The Discord Platform

Discord is a social media platform designed to facilitate discrete, user-managed conversation spaces. The platform allows *users* to create an account and then create and join *servers*, which are collections of voice and text chat *channels*. Apart from a small number of platform-wide policies, governance on Discord servers is largely left up to individual communities to decide. Servers have one or more *staff members*, often selected from their userbase. Common roles for staff members include *administrators (admins)*, a group encompassing the server owner and other managerial staff who are responsible for creating policies and managing the direction of the server, as well as *moderators (mods)*, who oversee enforcing those policies and managing everyday operations.² Individual servers may add additional staff roles, change the responsibilities of the roles, or forego traditional staff structures entirely, according to the preferences of the server admins. All roles and their associated permissions, including staff roles, are manually created and assigned by admins, resulting in a wide variety of role structures and uses between servers. This fluid organizational structure differentiates Discord from similar conversation spaces on other platforms such as Facebook groups or subreddits, which generally have top-down organizational structures imposed by the hosting platform with predefined permission sets. Access to Discord servers is by invitation only, with admins deciding who can invite other users; invites are also sometimes posted publicly on other social media platforms or on third-party websites such as Disboard.³

²For example, these roles are explicitly codified by Discord in <https://discord.com/safety/360044103531-Role-of-administrators-and-moderators-on-Discord>

³A website which allows server admins to post public invite links to their servers alongside a description and search tags. Users can then search the website to browse potential servers to join. <https://disboard.org/>

The partial privacy afforded by Discord's structure, where users have a single persistent account that can interact in multiple mutually exclusive spaces, makes it well-suited for a variety of use cases. Often, Discord communities form based on a shared interest or characteristic, and past work on Discord has studied the specific needs and use cases of these communities, such as fandoms [13, 14], gamers [30], and young people [38]. Past work on Discord has also studied applications for the platform in venues such as education [2, 25] and children's activities [32, 38], where the platform's channel-based structure assists organizational efforts.

2.2 Digital Communities of Marginalized People

We center our findings on the experiences of marginalized users, and particularly LGBTQ+ users, to highlight the elevated stakes and risks inherent to their use of the Discord platform. There has been significant prior work studying organization and community governance among marginalized users online, typically on more strongly networked broadcast platforms such as X [4, 26], Twitch [20, 40], or Mastodon and the Fediverse [33, 42]. On these platforms, communities have less rigidly defined boundaries, and content is generally publicly visible unless explicitly withheld, contrasting with the isolated structure of Discord. In this work, we begin to assess forms of community governance that emerged from the more atomic Discord network, as opposed to more open broadcast networks.

Past work has scrutinized the politics of visibility on broadcast platforms for marginalized users and found tensions between social networks' focus on reach and marginalized users' desires for safety and control of their content. Excessive visibility of targeted groups can lead to instances of harassment [17, 34, 36], leading many users to go to great lengths to attempt to control their visibility. For example, Carrasco and Kerne [6] analyzed how LGBTQ+ Facebook users employ strategies such as alternate accounts to avoid being outed to conservative peers, and have to actively circumvent affordances of the platform to do so. Similarly, DeVito [12] found that transfeminine⁴ TikTok users rely on extensive folk theorization to ensure that their content does not get served to harassers, and must attempt to "game" the algorithm to do so, introducing additional labor for an already marginalized population. Given that prior work has demonstrated the challenges with visibility and reach on public broadcast platforms, we seek to investigate how these challenges play out in the more private, locally-centered spaces afforded by Discord; closed spaces with local curation mitigate the risk of users losing control of their algorithmically served content, but may also pose additional risks of unchecked and unmonitored harassment or conflict, as mentioned in Section 2.1.

Discord's affordance of semiprivate communities also facilitates spaces centered around identity and ideology. This enables otherwise vulnerable communities of marginalized people to exist largely without external disruption. Floegel [15] analyzed this in the context of fandoms, observing how Discord permits queer fan works to circulate when other websites attempt to censor them. However, they also note that this same insular structure perpetuates racism in fan works, compounded by Discord's "problematic epistemic of neutrality" – the platform does not proactively remove offensive content, but rather gives users the tools to curate their own experience. Subsequently, much moderation work falls to individual server staff, who face additional barriers to effective moderation; for instance, Jiang et al. [24] observed difficulties in moderating Discord voice channels, where evidence of rule breaking is ephemeral. This relative lack of central moderation makes Discord servers safe havens for content such as queer fandom, but also allows them to be hubs for content such as illicit drug sales [39] and hate speech [18, 23, 27] if the server staff condones it. We investigate some of the effects of this decentralized moderation practice in this study.

⁴Broadly, people who were assigned the gender of male at birth, and who now hold a different gender identity.

3 Methods

We conducted semistructured interviews with fourteen Discord staff members across various roles, primarily moderators, administrators, and community managers. Our study followed a constructivist grounded theory approach [7, 8], with interview protocols continually updated through theoretical sampling to follow leads and inquiries established in previous interviews. This study was approved by our institution's Institutional Review Board.

3.1 Recruitment

Recruitment took place primarily on Discord from April to July of 2024. The first author identified public Discord servers of interest using features such as member count, member-staff ratio, and moderation policies. They then contacted the staff for recruitment using a research Discord account which publicly stated their name and university affiliation. The first author also distributed links to a project webpage via email and personal networks, and prospective participants contacted the first author directly. Eligible users were those who were at least 18 years of age, capable of conducting an interview in English, and an active Discord user. To better capture the variety of community organization and governance structures on Discord, we did not specify that participants must be formally designated as staff or hold any particular staff position.

3.2 Participants

We recruited fourteen participants for interviews. Prior to interviewing, participants completed a preliminary demographic questionnaire, which also outlined consent information. The age range of participants was from 19 to 38 years old ($M = 23.9$). The younger skew of ages is unsurprising given that, as of February 2024, over 74% of Discord's userbase consisted of people aged 16 to 34.⁵ Eight out of fourteen participants were white, with the rest of the sample being comprised of Black, Asian, and biracial participants. Three participants were cisgender men, three were cisgender women, and the remaining eight held a variety of transgender and nonbinary identities. Similarly, three participants described themselves as straight or heterosexual, while the remaining eleven reported a range of sexual and romantic orientations. Additionally, while we did not specifically ask participants about neurodivergence, four of our participants described themselves as neurodivergent in an open-ended response field.

To protect participant privacy, all interviewees are referred to using pseudonyms meant to take the place of their Discord username. Participants were given the opportunity to request specific pseudonyms in the follow-up questionnaire after the interview; while many participants selected pseudonyms that resemble usernames, none of the participant identifiers in this paper are actual usernames. Participants are referred to using their pronouns specified in the demographic questionnaire. Other personally identifiable information, such as names of servers or other users, has been redacted or pseudonymized by the research team prior to reporting.

Participants had a wide range of relationships with the Discord platform. All participants were longtime users of the platform, with an average of 7.4 years of Discord experience. Discord usage patterns varied widely, with high variance in the number of servers joined ($M = 75.2$, $SD = 56.3$)⁶. Participants were able to freely input their own held staff titles, and we have consolidated these into three major categories based on common delineations used by many Discord servers: *Admin*, including staff roles responsible for management such as server owners and administrators; *Mod*, including enforcement staff such as moderators and content queue verifiers; and *Community Manager*, encompassing communication and event programming roles. A breakdown of participant

⁵<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1327674/discord-user-age-worldwide/>

⁶Discord allows a single account to join a maximum of 200 concurrent servers.

Table 1. Participant demographics and staff roles.

Participant	Age	Gender	# Servers	Yrs. Exp.	Server Role(s)
Acabernicus	38	Nonbi-nary	45	6	Admin, Mod
Ward	20	Male	60	7	Admin
Rachel	34	Female	17	4	Mod
TwoFortyThree	23	Female	65	8	Admin, Mod
Jennifer1475	29	Female	200	9	Admin, Mod, Community Manager
Catalina	21	Male	200	8	Admin, Mod, Community Manager
Gamer	19	Nonbi-nary	100	7	Community Manager
Nalzon	23	Female	45	3	Admin, Mod, Community Manager
XG1	21	Nonbi-nary	12	8	Mod
Alexandra	28	Female	70	8	Admin, Mod
Rouq	21	Male	49	5	Mod, Community Manager
PotentiallyN-ico	19	Nonbi-nary	41	7	Mod
Eunhasu	20	Nonbi-nary	50	7	Mod
Rose	21	Female	100	6	Admin, Mod

roles under these delineations can be found in Table 1. All participants held some level of staff role on at least one Discord server, with thirteen participants reporting being moderators and eight reporting being server admins. All participants described being active members of their community in addition to being staff members, and no participant was solely in a staff role on their server without community involvement. Participants also occasionally held nontraditional staff roles on Discord servers, such as a graphic designer or corporate representative; where possible, we have mapped these roles to one of the three aforementioned categories.

3.3 Protocol

During the initial demographic questionnaire, participants were given the option of completing an interview either over Zoom or over a text platform. Text-based interviews were offered as an accessibility consideration, as well as in response to prior work describing privacy concerns that participants may have with Zoom [1]. The general outlines and topics for both video and text interview protocols were comparable. Ten interviews were conducted over Zoom, with the remaining interviews being conducted either on Signal or on Discord itself, at the participant's discretion. All interviews were conducted by the first author between April and July 2024. Participants were compensated with the option of a \$30 (USD) gift card or an equivalent donation to charity.

Zoom interviews were recorded and transcribed with otter.ai, at which point transcriptions were fully pseudonymized. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Text interviews were archived and pseudonymized. Because of the asynchronous nature of text interviews, the length of time each interview took varied; however, the lengths and interview contents of the resultant transcripts were similar.

Prior to each interview, interviewees were given consent information detailing how we would use their data and asking permission for us to interview and quote them. During this process, each interviewee selected a pseudonym. Following consent procedures, interviewees were asked a variety of questions about their experiences using Discord and managing spaces on the platform. Interview topics included: Finding and joining servers; moderation policies and server management; server culture; anecdotes and experiences with Discord; and the Discord software and company. Follow up questions were designed to elicit responses to topics introduced in the interview and some questions were added to future interviews in accordance with our constructivist grounded theory approach. A high-level list of interview topics is included as a supplement to this paper.

3.4 Analysis

Interview analysis followed our constructivist grounded theory approach [7, 8]. Throughout data collection, interview transcripts underwent open coding, and the resulting insights informed future interviews. The first author coded all interviews as they were conducted, supervised by the last author, with regular rounds of discussion between the first, second, and last authors during coding to discuss insights and themes. After we determined we had achieved theoretical saturation, we consolidated codes with multiple rounds of discussion among all authors, followed by a final round of coding to synthesize results and themes.

3.4.1 Positionality. Our analysis is necessarily rooted in our research team's positionality. The study was designed and conducted by the first author, a South Asian trans nonbinary person who has been a Discord user since 2017 and has been a server administrator since 2019 for several Discord servers designed as dedicated spaces for queer and trans users. After coding the interviews, the collected transcripts and documents were analyzed by the first author with additional comments from the second author, a queer first-generation child of deaf adults (CODA) who studies digital literacy. The study was supervised by the last author, a trans woman who is an expert in social technology and sociotechnical marginalization and an extensive Discord user, with assistance from the third author, a non-binary transfeminine person who is an expert in sociotechnical marginalization and the security and privacy of vulnerable groups. Our research team is well-positioned to study community management on Discord, and particularly its impact on LGBTQ+ populations. However, while the first author is a person of color, their experiences do not reflect all communities of color. Our research group demographics thus suggest gaps in analyzing the experiences of our Black and biracial participants.

4 Findings

We found that marginalized users rely on Discord to access crucial resources and communities which are embedded in Discord's semiprivate structure, such as local assistance groups or identity-specific information. Often, this information is constantly updated and not available elsewhere, making continued access to these Discord servers critical. Moreover, we found that membership curation practices help to maintain the security and comfort of these vulnerable spaces, but these practices can simultaneously jeopardize access to those spaces when applied indiscriminately, often at the behest of a single staff member, which can result in tangible harm for the isolated person. We investigated use cases for membership curation practices to determine which factors contributed to these negative outcomes, and we found that server staff use membership curation to resist cultural shifts within their servers and to oppose what they perceive as a Discord-wide emphasis on reach and discoverability, as well as to supplement underequipped moderation which struggles to maintain server safety with Discord's built-in tools. We analyze each of these findings in turn in this section.

Though we did not explicitly select for LGBTQ+ participants, we center their experiences in our findings, since they most clearly demonstrate instances where design and policy interventions would be necessary. We include other experiences for purposes of contrast, as well as to highlight opportunities for transferability of these findings to support other communities.

4.1 Discord Server Membership Mediates Continued Access to Crucial Resources

Our findings strongly suggest that Discord is a critical lifeline for many marginalized people, with servers typically functioning as both community hubs and resource repositories to access connections and information that would be unavailable offline. Several participants attested to the importance that Discord communities held for them. Every user cited fondness towards the platform and an appreciation of the positive communities they had cultivated. Participants recounted how Discord offered a means of accessing communities and resources specific to their marginalized identities, when that was not possible in person. For instance, Rachel (M)⁷, a participant with a chronic illness, recounted how Discord gives her a unique opportunity to connect with others who share her illness:

It's extremely important for me to hear from other patients, because it's the only way I've learned half the things I know about my symptoms... I really feel it was like, before Discord and after Discord in terms of everything I learned from the group.

Most participants noted particular value for LGBTQ+ users, and especially trans users. For many, Discord was a place that offered supportive and stable community when in-person interactions did not. Alexandra (A, M), a participant who runs a queer mutual aid Discord server, expressed how Discord provided an opportunity for a positive community of trans people in the face of a hostile political climate: "When trans politics took a really sour turn in the United States, I created [my server] with the intention of, if there's no other online spaces for queer people, this will be the last one." Similarly, Nalzon (A, M, CM), a participant who runs a Discord server for trans women, described how starting a Discord server was a critical lifeline for her after experiencing backlash from coming out as trans: "We went homeless... but after that, I felt like there was a need to have a sort of safe space for other trans people... What better way than to try to create a source of hope online, when oftentimes in the physical world, it's hard to find a safe space?" As these participants describe, Discord's affordances of private, locally-managed communities with strict access controls enable it to be a closely guarded "source of hope online". This places Discord in contrast to both broadcast social media sites such as Twitter and closed groups on sites like Facebook, both of which have far less flexibility in the openness, independence, and structures of their subcommunities.

In addition to facilitating social connections, we found that Discord servers often function as community-compiled repositories of information useful to marginalized people, including crucial health information. This is again particularly relevant for trans people, who often face legal and social challenges to accessing critical information, even online [10]. One notable trans-specific category of resource is guides on obtaining, producing, or administering DIY HRT.⁸ While DIY HRT functions as an important lifeline for trans people who lack sustained affordable access to hormones [3], obtaining DIY HRT falls into a legal gray area and information about it is therefore typically suppressed or understudied [16]. Multiple participants reported that Discord was a critical resource for discussing DIY HRT safely and securely. XG1 (M), a participant who managed a server

⁷Throughout this section, participant pseudonyms will have parentheticals after their first use detailing which staff roles they hold: Admin (A), Mod (M), or Community Manager (CM). This information can also be found in Table 1

⁸Do-It-Yourself Hormone Replacement Therapy, a term used to refer to obtaining or synthesizing doses of sex hormones without a prescription for the purpose of hormonal gender transition. DIY HRT is typically used as a means of circumventing legal, medical, or financial barriers to gender transition.

for transfeminine people, noted that the semiprivate nature of Discord allowed for more in-depth discussion than was possible in more public channels, such as “discussions of people making their own stickies⁹ ... and some word-of-mouth vendors.” They suggest that the relative privacy afforded by Discord is critical for the safety of everyone involved: “We also tell people to be very careful discussing DIY HRT on sites like Reddit where anybody can view posts. This is to protect distributors of DIY HRT and to keep our heads down and public discourse to a minimum.” However, because DIY HRT is a source of potential legal liability, some participants reported concerns about potential consequences for its discussion on their servers. Gamer (CM), a transfeminine participant, describes how one server ceased discussing DIY HRT due to these risks, with some users citing potential risks for younger transitioners “trying to do this without proper blood tests and hormone monitoring.” The server in question ultimately disbanded entirely due to the disagreement over whether to censor discussion of DIY HRT, cutting off access to all the resources within for all its members.

The dissolution of Gamer’s server highlights a recurring problem: since Discord functions as a crucial support network and information repository for marginalized people, disagreements within a Discord community can sometimes lead to severe offline consequences when access to those resources is cut off. As one example of this, we return to the case of TwoFortyThree (A, M) from our introduction. TwoFortyThree is a transfeminine participant who recalled an incident that happened after joining a local trans-focused server with a prospective roommate while looking for housing. She was uncomfortable with the predominant views of her roommate’s Discord circle, who were “really weird about being trans... and kind of misogynistic.” After confronting her roommate, there was a physical altercation between them, and the roommate arrangement was broken off. TwoFortyThree turned to the admins on the housing server for help, but they simply joined in with the harassment instead, turning a server that was previously a critical source of support into an additional vector for abuse: “Everyone on that server started fucking dogpiling, getting pissed at me, sending me hate messages... threatening me career-wise.” Ultimately, TwoFortyThree had to change to a new Discord account and distance herself from the housing server to stop the harassment and threats, and she subsequently lost access to her housing. TwoFortyThree’s experience is not unique; as mentioned before, Nalzon also reported becoming homeless after coming out online. Furthermore, public shaming and doxxing are common digital security threats experienced by transfeminine users, especially those who hold multiply marginalized identities [28]

Despite the risk of negative experiences on the platform, participants were reluctant to leave, primarily due to the platform’s established presence and resources and the lack of acceptable alternatives. Participants perceived Microsoft Teams, Skype, and Slack as “too corporate.” TwoFortyThree mentioned that Signal lacked the basic features that Discord had, such as channel-based organization, and was therefore not a sufficient option; similarly, Rouq (M, CM), a gay participant who is a moderator on an LGBTQ+ server, described difficulty with setting up Signal. When asked about alternatives, participants often instead expressed a desire for Discord as a platform to improve so that they could continue to access their critical social spaces and resources, with the prospect of migrating to another platform reserved as a last resort.

4.2 Manual User Curation through Server Moderation Mediates Access to Discord Servers

Participants expressed that moderation challenges on the Discord platform, combined with the platform’s perceived emphasis on reach, led to server design and management choices intended to deliberately curate the environment of the server. In turn, these membership curation decisions

⁹A form of DIY estrogen HRT.

limited marginalized users' access to crucial resources which require consistent, unfettered access to function. While prior work in this space has generally focused on content moderation, we found that these practices of deliberate curation extend to being selective about who is admitted or retained in a server's userbase.

4.2.1 Methods and Rationales for Curation. Participants expressed that membership curation was not only a critical tool for managing Discord servers, but that it also functioned as a means of cultivating positive communities in a way that official tools could not replicate. To this end, participants reported using a variety of goals when creating Discord servers. Typically, these goals are designed explicitly to avoid repeated negative experiences on prior online communities. As one example, Jennifer1475 (A, M, CM), a participant who runs a community Discord server for her job as well as a personal server, views membership curation as her responsibility to her community:

The Discord stands for something beyond just you. Even if it's your personal Discord... There are times where I've had to kick out my personal friends from my Discord because of something, and it doesn't always feel great, but there's also now the safety of other members that you have to consider... At the end of the day, the Discord acts as a mini business in and of itself... you have to treat it as a business and as a culture.

Jennifer1475 draws the comparison to a business to highlight the importance of maintaining the quality of the community by manually removing users who are not conducive to the shared goal of the server. This perspective centers membership curation as a necessary tool for the health of a space, akin to the role of a bouncer mediating access to a club.

Other participants described the dangers of failing to curate one's server proactively. In a contrasting example, Catalina (A, M, CM), a participant who has started and grown several hobby and community servers, cited a server he ran where an entrenched social clique was enabling a user to create a toxic environment: "There was one person in [the server] that would always just skirt around the rules and never break them explicitly, just push it to the very limit. I regret not banning them... but if one person in a clique gets banned, the other people in their clique will outrage." His later attempts to break up the clique led to resistance from the staff team, who had become close friends with the clique. The conflict ultimately led to the dissolution of the server. This demonstrates a tangible risk of insufficient curation: if an admin does not proactively manage their server's culture, they run the risk of losing control of it entirely and becoming unable to rein it in later.

Many participants articulated the fear of similar cultural shifts on their servers and described going to great lengths to deliberately shape their servers' userbases and cultures. Oftentimes, one step in this process involves observing new users to determine whether prospective users already align with the server's culture. Acabernicus (A, M), a participant who runs a small majority-queer hobby server, relied on their community to exert social pressure on new members to conform to the server culture, and banned those who would not: "The times when people have joined who were hostile to the atmosphere, they have either ended up leaving themselves or... politely but firmly been shown the door." Acabernicus facilitated this informal pressure and allowed users to naturally filter out via cultural deficit to preserve the space as a refuge for their queer userbase to feel safe and comfortable in, rather than allowing their server to become a source of "drama". In this way, they prioritized the experience of their existing userbase, preferring that to the uncertainty of attempting to accommodate new users.

As another step in this curation process, many servers implemented some form of direct verification or vetting procedure. This ensured that new users complied with the rules of the server, and that they would be a good match for the server's culture. In one notable example, Alexandra's

server had an extensive questionnaire for new users designed to identify potential homophobic or transphobic attackers:

There's questions meant to try and weed out people who have ideological worldviews based on hate, like... what they think of when they hear names like Bill Gates, Elon Musk, or George Soros... Then there's questions specifically to weed out people who have fascistic beliefs: "Does society benefit from conflict?" We have a couple of trick questions that are meant to bait people who are trying to pass off as queer but aren't. I think one of them was, "What are your opinions regarding women's sport?"

Alexandra demonstrated a highly defined threat model, formed in response to previous instances of harassment and transphobia, which has shaped her server's vetting process. To further investigate this, the first author requested and obtained a copy of Alexandra's server moderator's guide. The guidance for admissions included a highly detailed catalogue of "red flags" for potential users, which not only included traits associated with anti-LGBTQ+ and conservative demographics, but also included "little knowledge of LGBT history" and "crybully."¹⁰ This indicates that access to Alexandra's server, and the queer resources it compiled, was predicated on users matching a specific type of personality and queer background that conformed to the heavily curated norms of the space, which suggests tension between the safety and comfort of the server and unfettered access to resources for its vulnerable userbase.

4.2.2 Growth versus Cultural Homogenization: Contrasting Server Quality Metrics. Participants overwhelmingly reported the perception that the Discord platform heavily favored servers which prioritized growth, often to the detriment of smaller community-focused servers. Many participants were frustrated that several universally desirable server organization and access control features, such as integrated onboarding and permanent invite links, were gated behind a server designating themselves as a "Community Server." This is an opt-in designation for Discord servers which places additional restrictions on the kinds of content allowed on the server. In addition, participants reported that Discord promotes first-party financial incentives for growth in the form of Server Subscriptions, which allow server admins to set up paid membership tiers for their servers and split the revenue with Discord. This has led to a rise in servers dedicated to making a profit through Server Subscriptions. Ward (A), a participant who runs a mental health server, described one subcategory of these servers, "chill servers," which are social spaces designed for casual interaction: "There are tens of thousands of chill servers that people engage with, and they are heavily advertised on Discord. They have a lot of exposure. Very often, the main goal with these servers is to make money." Ward also worried that the profitability of running such a server could incentivize people to create a "growth server" designed to maximize profit, rather than a community-motivated server which focuses on meeting the needs of its userbase.

Every participant was strongly critical of the phenomenon of monetized growth servers. In addition to the first-party monetization options provided by Discord, some participants described third-party monetization routes by which monetized growth servers could form. Catalina discussed the practice of "server flipping," where a person creates a Discord server, rapidly grows the audience through advertising and promotions, and then sells the server to another person. This practice is a violation of the Discord Terms of Service, but Catalina, who has flipped servers before, noted that flipping is a common practice on many social platforms with little enforcement against it. Additionally, Rachel described an alternative third-party monetization strategy where an admin's Discord server had links to their newsletter on Substack, a paid subscription newsletter service.

¹⁰Alexandra defines "crybully" as "a person who claims victimhood or injustice as a manipulative technique, often using progressive language."

The Discord server partially served as an ancillary community space for subscribers to discuss and promote the newsletter. By advertising the Discord independently, the admin could recruit new members who would then have an opportunity to subscribe to the Substack. Both of these mechanisms directly linked server reach and growth with financial incentives for admins, and called into question whether growth was truly beneficial to the server as a whole given these incentives.

Some participants were more universally critical of any server which prioritized growth, whether they were monetized or not. Acabernicus criticized servers which operate with a “growth mindset,” noting that unrestricted openness can risk exposing server members to harassment and facilitates “significant moderation problems, or overmoderation.” Jennifer1475 agreed, and she proposed that membership curation was a means of combating the tendency of servers to gravitate towards this state over time: “My whole Discord’s culture is about close-knit community. So we actively keep people out... to keep the culture of the community intact, to ensure that people are only inviting their friends into the Discord when they already fit a certain model.” In this way, both Acabernicus and Jennifer1475 treat membership curation as a means of proactive moderation.

Jennifer1475’s response clarifies one common reason for access control mechanisms: a desire for *cultural homogeneity* as a form of opposition to the culture shifts and moderation problems brought on by growth. Cultural homogeneity refers to the unification of the cultural identity of a space, particularly in the face of prospective change [5, 41]. This serves to reinforce the existing culture of a server and ensures that new members who come in already conform to the norms of the space. Crucially, the beneficiaries of cultural homogeneity are the members on top of the culture’s power structure, whose position of power and influence is predicated on the continuation of the existing hierarchy. In the case of a Discord server, this is typically the moderators and staff members and their friends, who exert culture-engineering power through membership curation to maintain a culture which centers around their needs. This hierarchy is typically known and understood by server users. For example, Rachel recounted a time on a server she frequented where moderators used their outsized influence to enact changes to rules surrounding spoiler tags. As a regular user on that server, she did not get any traction proposing the rule until a moderator was convinced of her viewpoint, and she suggests that this was the sole reason the rule change was approved: “[A mod] was like, ‘You’re right, I’m really tired of this...’ I actually wonder if the rule was made for her, not for me.” Rachel expressed acute awareness of the server’s power dynamics and actively expected the norms and rules of the server to be aligned towards moderator interest, indicating an understanding that moderators, rather than regular users, hold the final say on the culture of the server.

This push towards cultural homogeneity and the resulting solidification of existing power structures can be protective, as in the case of Acabernicus’s server, which used membership curation to push transphobic users out of the platform. However, it can also have drastic and materially harmful consequences, such as in the case of TwoFortyThree in Section 4.1, whose housing and career stability were threatened because she disrupted an existing cultural nexus.

Because cultural homogeneity is so prized, many participants used techniques to limit their discoverability intentionally as a means of curbing growth. This was especially true of marginalized participants, who typically reported that the only way to access their servers was through word of mouth or other limited or invite-only mechanisms. This reliance on alternative methods to limit reach, in turn, both excludes these servers from community management tools and impedes their ability to effectively advertise within their own community.

4.3 Community Regulars Often Supplement Overwhelmed and Underequipped Server Moderation

Participants who serve in moderator roles told of significant difficulties in effectively carrying out moderation tasks. Most were understaffed to some degree; for some extreme examples, Ward and Catalina each reported about 2,000 users per staff member, while PotentiallyNico (M), a moderator on a queer community server, reported that their server had over 10,000 users per staff member. One common concern participants shared is that moderators on Discord servers are often very young teenagers, particularly on servers which recruit moderators from the general population. Catalina shared the moderator application results for an LGBTQ-oriented server that he ran, and over half of the applicants were aged 13 or 14. Younger moderators typically lack the experience and maturity to handle managing many people and potentially moderating serious or explicit topics. This is often compounded by excessive workloads; for example, Catalina spoke of another server which relied on younger teenage moderators that required 15 to 30 hours of unpaid service per week from each moderator. In general, moderator burnout is extremely common and turnover is high, leading servers desperate for applicants to cover the gap and worsening the strain on the remaining moderators.

In many cases, to address the perceived gap in moderation, participants reported non-staff users supplementing the work of moderators to protect critical spaces. Occasionally, it was an expected norm that community members would proactively assist with enforcing codes of conduct. Rouq described how on his server, members would band together in response to harassment incidents to “fight the troll until a moderator takes notice.” Similarly, XG1 described how they viewed their server as a “self-governing system,” noting that moderators only occasionally had to step in because “[their] users are good at moderating themselves.” These community responses effectively diffused the responsibility of moderation across all users, minimizing the labor required of any particular moderator.

The first author had the opportunity to witness such a community response firsthand when one participant, Eunhasu (M), had to interrupt their interview to respond to a raid incident on the sapphic-focused server they were a moderator for. A new user had begun posting transphobic content and harassing other users. Eunhasu granted the first author permission to observe the moderation response and walked them through the moderation protocols for responding to the situation. After a protracted moderation discussion, the transphobic user was banned. However, they immediately returned under a newly created Discord account and continued harassing other users. Eunhasu was the only staff member currently online, and they expressed being overwhelmed with the lack of scalable solutions which could be operated by a single moderator. They suggested that an auto-mod system would also be too inflexible to be useful, noting that it was “impossible to predict what would turn up” and that human intervention was typically necessary to handle moderation situations. Ultimately, the harassing user only left after several community members came to one another’s defense and shut down the harassing behavior.

While community responses are a helpful emergent mechanism for distributing moderation labor, they also offer challenges surrounding access to the critical communities and resources present on Discord, especially those centering marginalized users. In tandem with the effects of the curation practices outlined in Section 4.2.1, the net effect of this response is that access to a community is typically predicated on conforming to the norms established by the most prominent members of a server.

5 Discussion

Overall, we find that Discord’s affordance of closed conversation spaces with heavy membership curation by staff is a double-edged sword for marginalized users. While membership curation allows server admins to maintain the security of their spaces and resist the platform’s push towards growth, we observe that membership curation can result in marginalized, and especially LGBTQ+, users losing access to critical, irreplaceable resources, sometimes simply due to interpersonal conflict with those in charge of the space. Moreover, we find that Discord moderators often struggle to manage their spaces due to a combination of social and technical factors, such as emphasis on reach as a server quality metric and a lack of effective mod tools for scalable communities. This results in the responsibilities of membership curation falling to select cliques of users, which in turn leads to additional situations where users are pressured away from critical resources. This sets Discord apart from broadcast platforms, where moderation is largely standardized [26] and where visibility is managed at the user level through individualized practices [6, 12]. Because Discord communities often have more restricted access and are externally opaque, implementations of community governance that rely on public visibility, such as those suggested for Fediverse communities [33, 42], are impractical given the structure of the platform. Addressing access with regard to Discord’s “problematic epistemic of neutrality” [15] necessitates solutions which take into account the isolation and relative independence of each community; here, we present community-sourced guidance to address these factors.

In this section, we analyze membership curation and discuss alternative models for curating servers which may address the problem of users being cut off from resources. We also assess the assistance and preparation that the Discord platform provides to new server admins. From these, we develop broadly transferable design guidance for the Discord platform, as well as best practices for server staff, to help support marginalized users who rely on the platform to access crucial resources. Our design recommendations are summarized in Table 2

5.1 Critical Spaces, Guarded Cliques, and the Politics of Visibility

Our results reveal a tension among Discord server staff between the desire to provide access to critical spaces and resources and the necessity of keeping one’s community safe. We find that this manifests in the form of strict access control through various filtering or verification processes, which results in the creation of homogeneous communities with rigid membership criteria. Simultaneously, recall from Section 4.3 that moderation work is often supplemented by community members. These two phenomena in combination lead to a situation where curated communities hold outsized influence over admission of new users into their spaces. The result is a pattern of **guarded cliques**, where communities band together to resist disruption from outsiders through moderation actions, but in doing so, they make their resources more difficult to access for others who might rely on them.

The group and community dynamics endemic to Discord further differentiate this scenario from the case of broadcast social media, where those in charge of curating a space are better able to establish their own preferences but have less power to realize them. For example, on platforms such as X/Twitter [17, 36], TikTok [12], and Twitch [20, 31], individual users attempt to control visibility and repel harassment through manipulating content distribution algorithms, with varying degrees of success. This results in communities which are semipermeable, where boundaries are usually defined collectively by mutual blocking decisions rooted in community sentiment. On Discord, however, visibility inside a community is predicated on membership, which is in turn directly granted through the approval of staff members. Moderators can ban users who do not meet the criteria for membership from the entire server with a single action. This explicit boundary

Table 2. Our suite of design suggestions, separated into guidance for server staff and platform designers.

Design Suggestions	Server Staff	Platform Designers
Separate Permissions for Resources and Community Access	Use roles to gate channels with critical resources separately from the rest of the community	Allow differentiated visibility for selected information repositories and/or discussion areas
Facilitate Collective Governance Opportunities	Enable local opportunities for collective governance, such as open feedback on moderators	Implement first-party features to facilitate collective governance, such as voting and random juries
Revamp Discoverability Tools	-	Create discovery systems which prioritize other metrics besides usage for ranking communities
Proactively Supply Documentation to Prospective Staff	Provide pointers to resources for new admins to follow	Display contextual popups of relevant documentation when admin actions are taken
Openly Disclose Responsibilities of Server Administration	Share institutional knowledge with new admins regarding responsible, effective community management	Develop a central repository of training materials and resources for prospective admins

setting allows for stronger defenses against undesired engagement, such as the ideological filtering described in Section 4.2, but it also adds additional barriers to resources for users who do not conform to the cultural expectations for entry, or who simply do not get along with server regulars. This includes cases where the local culture perpetuates abusive behavior, such as in the case of TwoFortyThree. This is particularly problematic for those who cannot get these resources elsewhere or face difficulty in doing so, such as trans users and disabled users.

One practice to help address these barriers is to **implement tiered permission systems to differentiate resource access from community access** where possible. Many of the resources participants described are static and concrete, such as links to voice training resources for transfeminine people or disability advocacy group contacts. Similarly, other resources may be dynamic, but not necessarily sensitive, such as job postings for queer-friendly local businesses. These resources do not necessarily warrant the same degree of protection and trust as something like DIY HRT instructions or roommate applications might require. Servers could implement a system where all users are able to view static resources and “bulletin boards” of dynamic resources that are not sensitive, while only approved users would be able to post in the community and access more sensitive resources that require mutual trust to take advantage of. Under this model, bans would be reserved only for extreme scenarios, and the preferred moderation action would be revoking approved status. Notably, this type of system is already possible to implement on Discord through permissions, though participants expressed that it is difficult to do so without technical knowledge as detailed in Section 4.2.1. Codifying tiered access into the system explicitly and making it simpler to implement would help facilitate modified access structures. Alternatively, easy-to-use third-party

plugins could potentially implement these structures on Discord as-is; such plugins should require minimal technical knowledge to use, to address the underlying concern of setup difficulty.

5.1.1 Conform or be Cast Out: Atomization via Engineered Cultural Homogeneity. One of the underlying drivers of the tension between resource and community offerings is the perception of risk associated with unrestricted growth. As described in Section 4.2.1, users were concerned about a variety of potential bad actors, and as described in Section 4.3, users were also worried about the capacity of their moderation team. Many servers therefore resort to manual membership curation and limited visibility as mechanisms for mitigating unrestricted growth. This results in the sought goal of cultural homogeneity: a unification of the server's existing culture, and a solidification of its existing governance structures.

Cultural homogeneity, in turn, leads to atomization of the community as described in Section 4.2.2. An incumbent culture cannot sustain itself against a torrent of incoming people, especially when those people are inviting friends and others who have preexisting relationships and thus "import" other cultural ties. This results in communities limiting access to new users by avoiding discoverability, fragmenting the landscape of Discord and making servers hard to find – with the exceptions being servers that wish to grow indiscriminately and do not offer the same tailored protections for marginalized users.

Participants suggested two ways to help alleviate the problems exacerbated by this cycle. Firstly, as Acabernicus mentioned in Section 4.2, **more opportunities for member-based governance** would allow for a flattening of the power curve and for communal leadership in spaces which wish to be welcoming. Some example implementations might be the ability to make collective membership decisions by random jury, or to hold moderators accountable via community feedback. While third-party frameworks have been constructed to support community governance models, such as the PolicyKit infrastructure of Zhang et al. [43], we advocate for first-party support for alternative governance structures to alleviate concerns about required technical expertise.

The second community-sourced suggestion is a **revamped suite of discoverability tools** which rewards metrics beyond user count. Some example metrics sourced from participants include the average total/daily posts per user, the average account age, or the percentage of accounts with moderation infractions. This would allow servers to be recognized for alternative forms of positive development. Additionally, alternate metrics give users more transparency and insight into the spaces they would be joining, contributing an additional layer of safety for vulnerable populations who have expressed a desire to know these metrics to manage their personal risks [35]. Future work should explore and evaluate various alternative metrics to determine their suitability for the Discord context; based on our interviews, average daily posts per user and average lifetime posts per user are promising candidates to explore as discoverability metrics. Diversifying discoverability metrics would also offer a viable alternative for a user who wishes to make their own server and build up an alternative community in the wake of being removed from another community they seek to enter. Moreover, discoverability tools should allow users to **selectively control visibility**, to provide community agency and mitigate the risks of being discoverable [6, 12, 34]. One potential tool for this is a version of the *algorithmic emergency brake* proposed by DeVito [12], which would allow a server administrator to immediately cease discoverability when they feel as though their server's visibility has spread too far outside of their control. Such a feature would be relatively straightforward to implement on Discord due to the existing system of expiring invite links.

5.2 Addressing Shortcomings of the Discord Platform

A recurring theme in our interviews was that Discord did not have easily implemented scalable automated moderation solutions. While Discord has AutoMod, a built-in tool that allows server

administrators to set up word filtering in messages and profile names, as well as a plethora of third-party moderation bots, several participants still described having to program their own tools or completely wrote off automated solutions altogether as described in Section 4.3. Most moderation actions were done directly by a human moderator, increasing moderation workload and creating more situations where non-moderator members may step in.

In addition, as participants expressed in Section 4.2.1, the primary metric by which Discord measures server status is growth. Our participants perceived Discord as valuing this growth-oriented view of server success over other metrics such as community engagement or safety. Despite this prevailing sentiment, Discord has an extensive series of guides for effectively moderating servers,¹¹ including dedicated strategies to manage growth and to sustainably scale up a moderation team. These first-party suggestions directly address common pain points, such as managing sensitive discussions for transgender users. Many participants suggested a repository of moderation strategies such as this would be useful, but they did not appear to know that one already existed. One likely reason for this is that the Discord guide series is located on the Discord Community Portal, a website which is not linked in the client and is separate from the linked Discord Support webpage. Moreover, because participants do not trust Discord to care about this dimension of moderation as reported in Section 4.3, it is unlikely that they would expect these resources to exist or seek them out, even if they were placed alongside other Discord documentation.

To address this problem, we note that the Discord client has robust contextual client-side alert capabilities, and we would therefore recommend **proactively supplying documentation to admins or moderators of servers in situations where such documentation is relevant**. For example, admins of a server which has just experienced an influx of new members might be given client-side popups notifying them of the rapid growth and linking them to the Discord resources for managing rapid userbase growth. There are currently several tools and paradigms for implementing contextual help documentation [9, 19, 44], and a promising future direction is to determine the most natural way to present effective contextual help in the Discord environment.

Another recurring source of conflict is the discrepancy between the way that server management is conceptualized by prospective administrators and the actual responsibilities involved with managing a server. When creating a Discord server, users are not given resources or training for governance or moderation practices. Similarly, when joining a server as a staff member, training is up to the discretion of the existing staff. This can result in situations where administrators sign up for a position of responsibility that is not necessarily made apparent, and then may engage with delicate situations that carry real risks of harm if mishandled. This is especially true in the case of younger moderators, as described in Section 4.3, who are less likely to have the prior experience or maturity to handle these situations, exacerbating the lack of framing. To address this, we advocate for **more forward disclosure about the responsibilities of a server admin, as well as resources for the social management component of running a server**. In addition to contextually served guides as discussed previously, these resources might include a centrally-managed hub for moderation questions, or a set of guided scenarios used to train moderators. Future work should determine appropriate resources and information to furnish to better equip server admins to manage their communities.

5.3 Limitations and Future Work

Although this work provides a series of important community-sourced design suggestions and best practices, there are some limitations to consider in our results. First, our results are only the first step towards actualized designs for the Discord platform or for third-party tools. Future work

¹¹<https://discord.com/community-moderation-safety>

should therefore design and prototype systems which take these suggestions into account. Second, there are additional mechanisms for membership curation which are not discussed here because they are out of scope and difficult to gather insight on, such as individual user blacklists distributed among administrators via backchannels. Future work should directly study these alternative curation mechanisms and draw on them to facilitate additional insights into the Discord platform. Third, our participants all had significant experience with the Discord platform; future work should explore the experiences of newer Discord users and address barriers to onboarding or acclimating to the platform. Finally, as discussed in Section 3.4.1, our research group demographics suggest limitations in analyzing the experiences of Black and biracial participants. Future work should center these demographics, as well as multiply marginalized Discord users, to better understand and address unique challenges faced by those communities.

6 Conclusion

We have analyzed the practice of membership curation on the Discord platform and examined its impacts on access to resources for marginalized users, particularly LGBTQ+ users, and the harms that result from subsequent reduced access to resources. In doing so, we identified points of tension between the needs of marginalized communities and the affordances of the Discord platform, and we proposed a series of high-level design suggestions for the platform as well as best practices for server staff. It is our hope that these suggestions lay the foundation for Discord to better support the marginalized users who rely on the platform to provide them access to critical communities and resources that are otherwise inaccessible.

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