

# Gay Stuff and Guy Stuff: The Construction of Sexual Identities in Sidebars on Reddit

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## ABSTRACT

The online community *reddit* seems to offer countless opportunities for the expression of sexual identities in specific groups called ‘subreddits’ – from those who play their part in the ‘maledom sexology’ to others who ‘celebrate’ ‘femboys’ or ‘girls with glasses’ to ‘gay bros’ doing ‘guy stuff’, and ‘actual lesbians’ escaping the ‘male gaze’. The short descriptions that sidebars in these subreddits offer may appear to serve simply as a welcome to those whose identities they claim to represent. However, it is these very representations that co-produce the identities of those who could be included in them. Based on analyses of sidebars displayed in subreddits, we explore which aspects of identity are seen – and thereby made – to be markers of personal and collective sexual identities. By taking a closer look at what is said – and what is not – about both those who create content and those who are seen as this content, we seek to elucidate how sidebars in subreddits serve to include and/or exclude specific behaviours in/from the normative visions of socially negotiated sexual identities. Based on these identity re-presentations and their potential effects on the experience of reddit users, we examine how the unlimited opportunities for the construction of one’s (sexual) identity that the Internet appears to offer turn out to be restricted by hegemonic as well as other normative prescriptions of seemingly open and welcoming communities.

## KEYWORDS

Reddit, sexual identity, identity construction, Internet, online communities

## Introduction

The idea of the ‘true self’, of one (or, in some cases, more) ‘true’ identity/identities is especially salient in relation to researching identity construction on the Internet. Many academic texts about identity and the Internet construe online identity in terms of ‘exploring’ and/or ‘expressing’ one’s identity (c.f. Hillier and Harrison, 2007; Hegland and Nelson, 2002; McKenna and Green and Smith, 2001; however, see also Burke, 2000; DeHaan et al., 2012 for social constructivist approaches). An understanding of identity as unified and stable, and, importantly, more or less unchangeable is also common amongst non-academics.

In contrast, the Internet is often seen as a ‘safe space’ in which people can ‘try out’ different identities and representations of themselves, offering more opportunities for diverse identity constructions than offline worlds (c.f. Fraser, 2010; Hillier and Harrison, 2007; McKenna and Green and Smith, 2001; McKenna and Bargh, 1998; Alexander 2002a; Driver, 2006; Dasgupta, 2012). Driver, in their<sup>1</sup> study of online communities of queer youth, found that the young people they studied reached ‘beyond static sex/gender systems’ and called for ‘more nuanced ways of naming and leaving identities open for reinvention’ (2006, p. 244). However, while some researchers assume that the Internet leads to a multiplication of intelligible subject positions, this is not necessarily the case. It may instead be that few people actually deviate from their ‘real’ offline identities (Waskul and Martin, 2010; Valkenburg, Schouten and Peter, 2008) even so far as to have, at least in part, their use of social networking coalesce around their offline identities rather than any new, more fluid, online identity (Hargittai, 2008). As taboo sexualities are played out in online worlds, salient cultural norms may be not challenged, but reinforced (Waskul and Martin, 2010). Similarly, Harrison (2010) found that the participants in online spaces dedicated to gay men would often use their offline identities as the main, stable point of reference with which to communicate with others online.

In online communities of people with sexually deviant identities, essentialist narratives about gender and sexuality may be played out and reinforced rather than being questioned (Alexander, 2002b; Stegu, 2012), and other sexualities and sexual practices may not be considered at all (Alexander, 2002b). Based on our research in sexuality-related groups on the social community website reddit, we argue that the Internet is not simply one large safe space for people with deviant (sexual) identities, but that both socially hegemonic identity constructions and deviant normativity are salient characteristics of online communities. Indeed, as we will show in our analysis, the diversity of intelligible subject positions that is often argued to exist on the Internet can in reality be heavily policed.

In this paper, we use a broadly social constructivist approach to identity formation, based on the work of Michel Foucault (1991 [1975]; 1998 [1976]; 2002 [1969]) and Judith Butler (2006 [1990]; 2011 [1993]; 1997). Butler introduced the idea of identity as performative, which refers not to ‘performance’ in the usual sense, but to the concept of performative utterance as introduced by Austin (1962): they suggested that any utterance is not only constative – i.e. a description of something –, but has performative aspects in that it *performs* actions. For example, uttering a specific agreed-upon word in a BDSM scene may effect a pausing of the scene. Similarly, ‘expressions’ of one’s identity as expressions of ways of being can be understood to not simply ‘describe’ someone’s identity but to also prompt/force other members of the same group to follow these norms about how – or who – someone who is a member of that group should be (Butler, 2011 [1993], p. xix). In this sense, ‘normal’ expressions are always also ‘normative’ insofar as they create the very identities which they appear to merely express (Butler, 2006 [1990], p. 34; see also Ehlers, 2006 and 2008; Brickell, 2003 and 2005). Performativity, therefore, ‘must be understood not as a singular or deliberate “act,” but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names’ (Butler,

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<sup>1</sup> To not reproduce a conception of gender as binary, we will use the pronouns ‘they’, ‘their’, ‘them’, and ‘themselves’ to refer to persons of any gender.

2011 [1993], p. xii): it is through the repeated invocation of discourses that identities are created.

Harvey (2000, p. 146), writing about gay communities, suggests that ‘the central question of identity formation – “Who am I?” – is recast as “Where do I belong?”’, and Harper et al (2009, p. 302) argue that ‘adolescents who begin to develop an identity as gay or bisexual must learn the larger gay culture’s norms and expectations concerning ways of being, acting, and knowing’. The argument is that a person’s identities are influenced by the collective identities of the groups they belong to (a belonging which is itself variable and constructed) and vice versa. It has also been argued that members of marginalised identities may feel especially connected to ‘their’ community and that participating in online communities may also increase feelings of being connected to one’s ‘own’ identity offline (McKenna and Bargh, 1998; Harper et al., 2009; Nip, 2004). Consequently, it seems plausible that these communities may have an especially strong and therefore normalising effect on the identities of their members. This assumption is supported by studies which show that integration in online communities and interaction in online contexts interact with and influence offline aspects of people’s lives (c.f. McKenna and Bargh, 1998; McKenna and Green and Smith, 2001; Bargh and McKenna, 2004; Harper et al., 2009). As Waskul and Martin (2010, p. 305) argue: ‘Ultimately, it makes little sense to maintain rigid boundaries between the actual and the virtual, for they are all a part of the same universe of human experience’ (see also Silver, 2000).

In this text, we understand ‘identity’ in relation to the personal and collective selves of individuals and the groups they belong / are ascribed / ascribe themselves to as well as their interactions. Furthermore, we understand identity construction both in relation to *what* is constructed (which identities are constructed) as well as *how* it is constructed (which norms govern how particular identities are supposed to be expressed).

## **What Is Reddit?**

Reddit, located at <http://www.reddit.com>, is an online forum where links to other online content (e.g. websites, videos, pictures, ...) or written texts are posted (as so-called ‘threads’). Posts and comments are generally visible to all visitors of the site. However, only registered users can interact with posted content and create posts and comments themselves. In order to register, users need to supply a username and a password – no e-mail address is required. Registered users are often referred to (and often also refer to themselves) as ‘redditors’ (reddit about, 2013). Redditors can create new threads and reply to other threads as well as ‘upvote’ and ‘downvote’ posts and comments. The more upvotes in relation to its downvotes a post or comment gets, the higher up in the default view of the list of posts/comments it moves.

Content on reddit is divided into different ‘subreddits’, the reddit term for communities dedicated to a certain topic or range of topics (reddit about, 2013). Redditors can ‘subscribe’ to individual subreddits so that posts created in these subreddits show up on their ‘front page’, the default landing page for registered users. Subreddits can also be accessed directly via ‘[http://reddit.com/r/\[name of subreddit\]](http://reddit.com/r/[name of subreddit])’ and are therefore often referred to with ‘r/’ in front of their names, as we do it in this

paper. Subreddits can be created by any redditor, and users are encouraged to do so (reddit, 2013). Subreddits can be spaces for discussing particular topics, work as networking tools for people with the same interests, problems, experiences or goals, or serve many other purposes depending on the respective rules, if the moderator(s) have laid out any. Moderators are redditors who have special administrative powers in a given subreddit, either because they have created it themselves or because they have been appointed moderator by another moderator. They make sure the rules of a subreddit are respected, and have the option to edit content, delete posts and comments, and block users to enforce them.

There are currently more than 213,594 subreddits (metareddit, 2013), of which more than 4000 are advertised as 'active', meaning that new content is being created in them (reddit about, 2013). The 20 most active subreddits such as r/science, r/politics or r/movies have over one million subscribers each, with r/funny and r/pics counting more than 3 million (stattit, 2013). In our research, we focused on the content of sidebars, which are a part of the fundamental layout that is common to all subreddits. They are usually located on the right and contain several key elements of the subreddit, including its name, a list of moderators, the subscribe/unsubscribe button, and a button which allows to create a new post in the subreddit. In many cases, they also contain a description of what the subreddit is (supposed to be) about, what kind of content users are encouraged to post and what is discouraged or even forbidden, as well as links to other subreddits, mostly to inform users about subreddits for similar interests.

## **Who is on reddit?**

As there is no authoritative source of data about reddit, we collated data on the demographic features of reddit based on a survey conducted by reddit in 2011<sup>2</sup> (reddit survey, 2011) and data from *Google Display Network Ad Planner*<sup>3</sup> (DoubleClick Ad Planner, 2012).

About 70–80 % of reddit users consider themselves male and about 20–30 % consider themselves female (reddit survey, 2011; DoubleClick Ad Planner, 2012). In the reddit survey, about 0.6 % chose the answer 'none'. According to the data from Ad Planner, about 25 % of reddit users are between 18 and 24 years old, 30 % are between 25 and 34 years old, and 20 % are between 35 and 44 years old (DoubleClick Ad Planner, 2012). According to the survey, about 50 % of reddit users are between 18 and 24 years old, 35 % are between 25 and 34 years old, and only 7 % are between 35 and 44 years old; additionally, about 7 % are under 18 years old (reddit survey, 2011). These large differences may be explained by selection bias in the reddit survey: it is possible that younger reddit users disproportionately noticed the call for participants, or felt more compelled to take the survey for various reasons, e.g. a stronger relation to the

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<sup>2</sup> While the survey received over 32,000 responses, it cannot be assumed to be representative for reddit because of potential selection bias, self-reported replies and the sheer number of reddit users (Morris, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> *Google Display Network Ad Planner* is an online tool which users of Google's ad services can use to target specific groups. It displays demographical data about websites where Google online ads are displayed. The information it displays 'is generated through demographic inference algorithms that combine third-party demographic data with Google sample data' (Google Display Network Ad Planner, 2012).

‘reddit community’ and/or a better understanding of how such online surveys work. In any case, both Ad Planner and the survey place an overproportional percentage of users in relatively young age groups.

According to the survey, about 40 % of reddit users are students; among users who are older than 18 years, about 31 % have ‘some college’ education; 4 % hold an associate degree, 36 % a Bachelor’s degree and 15 % a professional or postgraduate degree (reddit survey, 2011). According to Ad Planner, 51 % of reddit users have college level education, 21 % hold a Bachelor’s degree, and 7 % hold a postgraduate degree (DoubleClick Ad Planner, 2012). Finally, in the reddit survey, 29 % of the responses indicate that the respondent’s total yearly household income is less than \$20,000; in the age group over 24 years, this percentage drops to 14 % (reddit survey, 2011).

Together, these data suggest that a disproportional number of reddit users come from a middle-class background. The small number of non-binary-gendered respondents in the reddit survey (Google Ad Planner does not include alternatives to ‘male’ and ‘female’) may point to a general lack of critical awareness of non-hegemonic identity aspects among the majority of users. Even though the demographics of specific subreddits can vary enormously depending on the respective topic, we believe it to be important to keep in mind that these statistics seem to point to widespread economic and educational privilege amongst reddit users.

## **Methodology**

Because of the large number of subreddits to be found on reddit, we could not include all of them in our analysis. In the collection of our data, the interconnectedness of subreddits through links in sidebars was crucial. We took r/sex, a community with currently more than 270,000 subscribers, as a generic starting point, then went to other subreddits via the links r/sex provided in its sidebar. From these subreddits, we went further to the subreddits they linked to in their sidebars. And finally, we also looked at subreddits which were in turn linked to in the sidebars of these subreddits. In addition to the resulting list, we also included subreddits we found via metareddit.com and stattit.com which seemed relevant to our intended purpose. Indeed, as we will show in our discussion of the data later, the very way *how* some sidebars linked to certain subreddits proved to be an interesting point of analysis. We first collected all these sidebars (303 altogether), then analysed them in relation to common strategies they employed in relation to identity construction.

We chose to focus on meta-information about subreddits (primarily sidebars, but also HTML page titles) rather than the actual posts within them for a variety of reasons. As sidebars contain the most basic information of a subreddit, they play an important role in the presentation of a subreddit to whoever visits it. As the name of a subreddit often does not give enough information about its purpose and target audience, users who access it for the first time are likely to look for an explanation of what – and for whom – a subreddit is intended for in the sidebar. Additionally, sidebars often define what kinds of content is allowed, acceptable and desired. This necessarily demands a clarification of some kind, and we looked at the definitions which were provided and their likely effects, as well as possible reasons for when no such definitions were

given. If we see texts as (containers for) traces of ideological struggles on identity (Resch, 2001), then the prominent texts in sidebars can offer insight into how user groups and their identities are constructed.

Last but not least, sidebars function as a tool to turn users into subscribers, so that the subreddit community can 'grow', i.e. that more content is submitted and awareness is raised. As a subreddit stops being active if it fails to gain enough momentum to attract subscribers who create content, it is safe to assume that many sidebars are created with the aim of making the subreddit as attractive as possible to the right kind of users, i.e. their target audience, and by doing so, moderators have to rely on what they see as the most important, characteristic aspects of their subreddits' (users') identity. Therefore, what is written/presented in the sidebars, how it is written/presented, and also what is missing from it, influences users' perspectives of what a certain community stands for.

### **Patterns of Identity Construction**

When looking at which strategies are employed in subreddits' sidebars and which effects they (aim to) achieve, we found three patterns to be especially common. First, sidebars in which hegemonic perspectives are drawn upon implicitly. Here, one dominant perspective is treated as the 'obvious' one which does not need an explanation and alternatives do not feature at all, as if they did not exist. Second, sidebars in which hegemonic perspectives were made explicit in some way or another, and alternatives were offered, mostly in the form of links to other subreddits; however, these alternatives were not afforded the same importance as the dominant perspective. Third, sidebars in which an inclusive approach to identities was emphasised, and openness and non-definitions were encouraged. These three patterns are not mutually exclusive but may co-exist in one and the same subreddit. Furthermore, they exist at the same time on continua of being more or less deviant in relation to wider social norms; and more or less accepting/supportive of deviance in relation to the subcultural norms of particular subreddits.

### **Assuming Universality**

Many subreddits, especially those oriented towards the sharing of pornography, contain no or only very little explicit information on their intended target audiences. Yet they still close down certain avenues for identity construction, and certain areas of exploration for users. Almost all of these subreddits are built for a straight male audience looking for different variations of content about 'girls' or 'women'. The sidebars in these subreddits are often very basic and contain little information; however, when they provide information about their content, this information often refers to hegemonic perspectives which are assumed to be – and thereby constructed as – universal. The unquestionable naturalness of these perspectives and identities serves to preclude alternative realities/identities.

In the sidebar of r/blondehairblueeyes, users are reminded that the purpose of the subreddit is 'to post girls with the wonderful combination of blonde hair and blue eyes'. No link to other subreddits which might cater to an audience interested in boys is given, and the possibility of an interest in blond hair and blue eyes independent of

the gender of the person who has them is neither made explicit nor hinted at in any way. Similarly, warnings about the posting of pictures of underage people often exhibit a straight male perspective only. r/bracesfetish, a subreddit for posting pictures, bans ‘underage girls in a sexual context’ but does not mention boys. This is not because pictures of underage boys are allowed or even welcome in this subreddit, but because they are simply not seen as a potential object of interest for users who might visit r/bracesfetish. A sexual fetish for braces is restricted to a sexual fetish for *females* with braces, and against the background of reddit’s userbase and the lack of any challenge to heteronormative assumptions in the sidebar, it can safely be assumed to be understood as *males’* fetish for females with braces.

Similarly, the sidebar of the subreddit r/penis, which is used for the distribution of pictures of penises, does not explicitly state what or whom the subreddit is for either. However, it does contain a statement on the common practice of users posting pictures adding ‘[m]’, ‘[f]’ or similar labels in the title of their posts to denote the genders (if not simply genitalia) or the nature of activity involved in the media they are posting. Users of r/penis are told that ‘[t]here’s no need to put “[m]” anywhere in the title [of posts]. You have a penis. We know you’re male.’ This expression of unquestioned ‘common sense’ narrows down the possible identity expressions of all users of r/penis. By equating having a penis with being male, r/penis forecloses the possibility for involvement in the subreddit by sections of the trans or genderqueer community, and the potential for their readers to explore such avenues in their postings. The presence of a penis is associated with male – and only male – identity, which precludes the existence of non-male penis bearers and male people without penises.

Such ignorance of non-hegemonic perspectives is not simply a result of the brevity of sidebar information. On the contrary, it is even more striking in subreddits which provide a lengthy description of what they are (supposed to be) about. The subreddit r/maledom offers a lot of information in their sidebar, all with a distinctly heterocentric slant based on the premise that its subscribers are sexually dominant heterosexual men or the women who (want to) submit to them. The sidebar provides a rather detailed explanation of what the world is supposed to look like while still managing to maintain a strategic position of heterosexuality as an unmarked identity category. The men and women in r/maledom are never labelled in their sexual orientation, as they are simply implied to be heterosexual; indeed, it is this limited form of heterosexuality that forms the very basis on which the r/maledom ‘sexology’ rests, and yet it is not once made explicit. It does not need to be made explicit, as it is exactly its being hidden in implicitness and unspoken assumptions that allow it its powerful position in/as hegemony.

The ‘Maledom sexology’ ‘summarized in 2 points’ in the sidebar includes various interpretations of behaviours that seem not to fit with the strict/restricted way sexuality is described to work. Any female opposition to supposedly inevitable male dominance is not interpreted as a rejection of the maledom ideology and proof for different approaches to sexuality but is explained as an opposition merely to submitting to *inferior* men:

‘If a man is [...] superior enough to a woman, then this woman will be willing to please and satisfy that man according to that man’s preferences and likings.

[...] Women don't disapprove submission; women disapprove not having the [sic] own freedom to choose what man to submit to.'

The sexual preferences of men and women are not presented as preferences, but as the natural, almost inevitable state of the world: 'The male loves the beauty of submission; the females love the beauty of superiority. [...] Let's go genetic !!' All possibilities outside this 'natural' binary are constructed as non-existent or inferior: '*True Women Prefer A Superior Man; A True Superior Man Prefers Submissive Women*' (our emphases). Consequently, possibilities which do not need or might even reject a binary of male dominance and female submission in all forms of sexuality are excluded, and identities which do not comply with this 'sexology' cannot easily arise in this context. This dynamic works even though – or rather, because – the main ideas on which the ideology of r/maledom is based are treated as obvious to everyone. Despite the lengthy and detailed explanation of the r/maledom worldview, its key concepts remain largely unexplained or draw heavily on wider hegemonic narratives of the 'true' status of men and women.

As sexual play with dominance and submission is seen as a logical and obvious consequence of natural roles that does not require any further explanation, any subversive potential that is sometimes associated with such power play (c.f. Califia 2000 [1994]; Ritchie and Barker, 2005) is precluded. As power and power roles are embedded in a strict framework that does not allow for fluidity and change, gendered ideas of sexual positions and desires are re-produced and reinforced through the silences in relation to non-hegemonic perspectives. As the context in which sexual acts are performed influences their meaning (c.f. Weiss, 2011), the subversive potential of dominance-submission power play is foreclosed. The conflation of ideology with 'natural truth', supported by the use of pseudo-scientific allusions to public understandings of evolutionary theory ('The most superior male is not the most perfect physically, but the best adapted to his natural environment.'), serves to re-create the hegemonic narrative from which the 'sexology' draws under a veneer of rational essentialism. The entire sidebar works to erase the marks of any ideological position within itself. By the end, due to the hegemonic position of the narratives r/maledom draws upon and the exclusion of the possibility of anything else functioning effectively, the co-dependent set of identities that have been constructed appear to occupy not just a particular position but the only position: an identity that attempts to claim a stable label as simply inevitable.

One subreddit that shows a more pronounced ambiguity in re-producing hegemonic narratives to create an unmarked, naturalised identity category is r/gaybros. This subreddit is described as 'a place for gay guys and men to get together and talk about, well, guy stuff'. There are two key aspects to the identity of 'gay bros' that r/gaybros (and related subreddits such as r/bros4bros) asserts through the sidebar: their homosexuality, and their masculinity. In the quote given above, both concepts are not explained in any more detail. It is expected from users to know what 'gay guys' are and how what they do is different from 'guy stuff'. The sidebar elaborates on 'guy stuff' later, but the hedging expression 'well' indicates that everyone already knows what r/gaybros is about.

While r/gaybros does not contain a lengthy exposition of the key aspects of the 'masculine part' of a 'gay bro' identity, it does offer a list of examples seen as



relevant to it: ‘Sports, video games, military issues, grilling, knives, gear, working out, gadgets, tech, tv, movies and more.’ It is implied, with the final addendum of ‘and more’, that these items are all part of a larger supercategory of ‘guy stuff’: as r/bros4bros, a dating subreddit for ‘gay bros’, asserts, gay bros are ‘men who like men who like manly stuff’. Knowledge of what constitutes this supercategory of ‘manly’/‘guy’ ‘stuff’ and what the items specifically outlined have in common in relation to the supercategory are assumed to be known by users. Just as r/maledom relies on outside ideas of nature and heterosexuality to create an identity that does not need any other explanation, r/gaybros appeals to an outside ideal of what constitutes masculinity and puts it in contrast to stereotypical ideas of ‘gayness’. It is not ‘gayness’ that is seen as the primary aspect of users’ identities, but ‘guyness’. In the context of the appreciation of ‘straight-acting gayness’ (in the sense of an adoption of hegemonic masculinities) and the devaluation of ‘effeminate’ masculinities in gay (online) communities (Stegu 2012), the lack of examination of the issue forces and allows users of r/gaybros to rely on hegemonic ideas of how their identity, as *men* within and, at the same time, in opposition to a (specific) concept of ‘gay men’, should be constructed.

The subreddits we discussed in this section can be seen as representative of a larger trend within the range of subreddits we looked at. They show how a large section of identity construction in subreddits works. The ground-work of the creation of these groups was done, prior to the groups’ existence, in the societies of those that created the subreddit, including, to varying extents, the rest of the internet. For the people that created these subreddits, the hegemonic perspectives they use, and re-produce under their own interpretation, were the most easily available narratives around which a group identity could coalesce in an online space. This ease is, in part, the consequence of the dominant position these perspectives hold, and subreddits can actively re-produce these dominant positions. As r/maledom shows, reconstructions of dominant narratives constitute an active attempt at producing users, as a group, in an online space, even if the strategy they choose is most effective in its silences.

### **Mentioning ‘Others’**

While in the subreddits discussed so far, hegemonic perspectives and identities were simply assumed, some subreddits’ sidebars use more explicit ways of restricting content (in)to a certain stencil. Unlike complete ignorance, such a restriction requires and potentially creates an awareness of what lies outside of whatever the restricted object/identity is restricted to. When moderators include a rule in their subreddit that prohibits a certain type of content, they cannot avoid acknowledging that what they exclude from their view of what a certain subreddit stands for could be seen as suitable for it. Sidebars vary in the degree of their acceptance of as well as their stance towards the ‘Other’: some invite everyone but also hint towards more specific subreddits or simply exclude certain perspectives through prohibition or strict redirecting while some define ‘Others’ as the object of desire around which their collective identity coalesces.

The strategies employed in r/askseddit can be seen as an extension of what has been discussed in the section above. r/askseddit is the questions and answers version of r/seddit, a subreddit for discussion about seduction. By linking to r/pickup4dykes for

'lesbian/bi/... girls pursuing women' and to r/fPUA for 'straight/bi/... girls pursuing men', r/askseddit redirects perspectives that are not straight and male. While there are no rules which state that posts by women interested in the seduction of others are not allowed, the links to the two subreddits for 'girls pursuing' make it clear who is the target audience of this subreddit. Additionally, the glossary provided in the sidebar of r/askseddit contains items such as 'AMOG = Alpha Male Of the Group (or competition in general)', 'HB = Hot Babe', 'SARGE = to pick up women', and 'LMR = Last Minute Resistance (Woman resists having sex at the last minute)'. Men interested in the seduction of other men fall out completely, as their perspective finds a voice neither in the description of the subreddit itself nor in the provided links. Altogether, the seduction of women by men is constructed as the norm; girls as seducers are acknowledged, but relegated to secondary subreddits; gay male and all kinds of transgender interactions are not considered at all.

Some subreddits show an awareness of the difference between the theoretical possibilities and the actual reality of their communities. For example, while it is linked to in other subreddits with the caption 'Girls who love cum', the sidebar in r/cumsluts itself states that;

**'Gay is Okay!** A cumslut can come from anywhere and all are welcome. Mark them with an **[m]** in the title as they are rare here and not all are fans. Good luck! Also, try /r/gaycumsluts for more favorable responses.' (their emphasis)

Similarly, but without an extra effort to encourage 'unusual postings', r/OnOff is explained to be about '[p]ictures of people (why lie its [sic] mainly women) with clothes and without clothes'. While such approaches acknowledge diversity, they also refer back to norms about which identities and behaviours are considered acceptable in a particular community. The assertion in r/cumsluts that 'Gay is Okay' implies that that 'okayness' is not something that can be assumed in the way that the gendered sexual roles in r/maledom can. Therefore, in these subreddits, rather than just being assumed silently, norms are established by referring to the exclusions they entail. While the existence of deviation from these norms is acknowledged, it is not encouraged, and the risks associated with such deviations are not challenged.

The subreddits r/gaybros and r/bros4bros, which we have already discussed above, make an effort to frame identity restrictions in an atmosphere of inclusiveness. The moderators of r/bros4bros explain that they 'don't exclude people because of who they are' but still ask redditors to 'keep in mind' what/whom the subreddit is for and to '[m]anage [their] expectations accordingly'. Condensing this balancing of two opposing interests into one sentence, the sidebar suggests that the subreddit 'is meant to be an INCLUSIVE sub for anyone in the GSM community' (their emphasis; GSM stands for gender and sexual minorities) but immediately adds, 'who likes beer, sports, and shit'.

While this differentiation between gender, sexual identity and particular behaviours (in the form of interest in beer, sports, etc.) could hold potential for disrupting strict identity norms, the extent to which this potential can be realised is questionable in the context of the references to hegemonic ideas which we have examined above. Furthermore, the statement in r/gaybros that '[a]ll are welcome, but come with a thick

skin and a sense of humor’ indicates that no particular effort is made to make people who deviate from norms feel welcome, which may serve to re-produce these norms. Furthermore, this can be seen as a further citation of ideas of ‘strong’ masculinity.

r/polyamory provides an example of how deviant identities can be defined differently. Its sidebar contains links to subreddits with a focus on sex under the headline ‘for the more promiscuous of us’. On the one hand, the use of ‘us’ implies that the community of r/polyamory remains intact even when stretched across subreddit boundaries, and that whatever aspects of identity one might engage in in the linked subreddit communities do not exclude oneself from the community of r/polyamory. Additionally, all members are positioned on a continuum of promiscuity rather than on one side of a hierarchical binary ‘promiscuous/non-promiscuous’. On the other hand, the engagement in practices that are seen as primarily sexual is not fully embraced: sexual promiscuity is associated with low social prestige both generally (Rubin, 1989) and in some polyamory communities (Klesse, 2006).

One powerful way to police and restrict potential identity constructions is the use of definitions, as they appear to exist independently of any particular subject which may have uttered them and can therefore serve to naturalise and universalise statements. In addition to defining what *is* (see the section on assuming universality, above), they can also define what *is not*. For example, according to the rules of r/nswfhardcore where posts ‘must involve at least one male and one female’, ‘Lesbian is not hardcore’, which is added without any further explanation; gay and other sex is not mentioned at all.

A similar way in which definitions are used is to define someone else, i.e. people outside of a given subreddit’s community. This is especially prevalent in pornography-related subreddits where the sexualised object is defined for the sexualising audience. A prime example of this is r/traps, a subreddit that gets its name from the still common idea that trans people (especially trans women) ‘trap’ others by luring them in while ‘hiding’ their ‘true sex’ (Cord, 2011). r/traps makes it clear that ‘[n]ot everyone can be a trap’ and allows ‘Passable & Feminine traps only’ who should also be ‘young and beautiful’ – ‘Content can be from/of anyone as long as they’re passable [and] feminine’ as ‘/r/traps is only for MtF content’ (MtF stands for Male to Female). In r/traps, the negative images associated with transsexuality and supposedly predatory sexual deviants are fetishised, and this fetishisation is established as the norm. Similarly, r/femboys states as one of its rules: ‘**No transsexuals!** This is for feminine *boys!* MtF transsexuals are **girls.**’ (their emphasis) At a first glance, this could be interpreted as accepting the desire of many trans people to be accepted as the gender they feel. However, the rule does not mention any FtM people or people outside a binary conception of gender/sex: the ‘transsexuals’ in the first part get recast as only MtF people. It is questionable in how far FtM people would be accepted as ‘boys’ in the subreddit. These subreddits therefore clearly define who can count as a member of a particular sexually fetishised group and who cannot, and construct a shared group identity in relation to this group of Others.

One recurring pattern related to the definition of Others is the ‘celebration’ of identities. For example, r/tgirls presents itself as ‘celebrating the beauty of pre-op and non-op MtF transsexuals’; r/lesbians is described to be a subreddit for ‘celebrating beautiful women being intimate with each other’; r/girlswithglasses ‘is dedicated to

celebrating beautiful women who require corrective lenses’; and r/christiangirls is ‘dedicated to celebrating beautiful, Godfearing women’. All of these subreddits serve as picture/video collections of the objects of their ‘celebrations’ for an audience who appears to have a very clear idea of what is worth ‘celebrating’ and what is not. In other words, what is described as ‘celebration’ in these subreddits is simply fetishisation. The communities fetishised in such a way create their own spaces, and show an awareness of this phenomenon. For example, r/actuallesbians maintains that ‘[o]ur subreddit is named r/actuallesbians because r/lesbians is not really for or by lesbians’. The difference between these approaches does not result from the intended purpose of the subreddits alone (r/lesbian is mainly for posting pictures, r/actuallesbians is mainly a platform for discussion): r/dykesgonewild, which shares the focus on posting pictures and videos with r/lesbians, positions itself as ‘[f]ar from the male gaze’, and r/dyke refers to r/lesbians as a place for ‘girl-on-girl porn that caters to a straight audience’.

### **Active inclusivity**

Apart from the passive silence on or the active counter-acting of deviating identities, there are also subreddits which make an active (and explicit) effort at inclusivity. This kind of inclusivity is not limited to a link to a deviant subreddit, as in r/askreddit, or a welcome to deviancy immediately relativised by a lack of protection from negative consequences, as in r/gaybros’ compulsion to wear a ‘thick skin’. Instead, it embraces different expressions of identity, combined with an awareness that such expressions may never be captured in an exhaustive list that could be presented in a subreddit’s sidebar.

The sidebar of r/bisexual, in spite of the subreddit’s specific name, states the subreddit’s purpose to be a dedication to discussion and support for not just bisexuals but ‘anyone who doesn’t quite fit the otherwise binary “straight” and “gay” pattern’ including ‘pansexuals’, ‘omnisexuals’, ‘queers’ etc. The ‘bi’ part of ‘bisexual’ is denied its legitimacy (‘The world isn’t binary [...] This group is for discussion and support for those who fall in between, for the “shades of gray”’), and even the ‘sexual’ part is actively negated as necessary for participation: ‘Whether sexual or asexual, everyone is welcome.’ Additionally, the ability of users of r/bisexuality to express their diverse identities is facilitated by using a system of ‘flags’ that can be added to a user’s nickname. This flag system is spelled out at the beginning of the subreddit’s sidebar telling users that they can flag themselves with a range of identifiers from the ‘bisexual’ of the subreddit’s title to ‘transgender’, ‘genderqueer’, ‘asexual’, ‘ally’ (presumably ‘of the community’) or the, potentially intentionally, ambiguous ‘rainbow’. The emphasis of bisexuality as a sexual identity may lie not on the specifics of the sex people desire but on the(ir) transgression of the common gender and sexuality binary. However, the inclusivity that is exhibited in r/bisexuals can be linked to the tensions between non-/specificity and in-/visibility in movements of deviant sexual identities. Namely, it has been argued that complete non-specificity may negatively affect the potential impact of political movements (Gamson, 1995).

The subreddit r/radicalqueers asserts its inclusivity through prohibitions on various kinds of ‘oppressive’ language: ‘Do not post content or comments that are sexist, racist, queerphobic, transmisogynistic, ableist, classist, ageist, or are otherwise

oppressive.’ Just as r/gaybros uses a list a of activities/items ending in ‘and more’ to allude to a masculine supercategory restricting the audience to those with access to this larger narrative of masculinity (see above), r/radicalqueers ends the list simply with a mention of language that is ‘otherwise oppressive’. This has the effect of restricting the identity constructed/projected by the subreddit to those who have an understanding of some of the ideologies surrounding oppression. While this strategy immediately appears to foster inclusivity, it also appeals to a wider narrative of ‘oppression’ to define the limits of the intended audience of r/radicalqueers, though the sidebar never explicitly mentions such limits. As in other subreddits where rules restrict posts and comments to a certain form of content, r/radicalqueers’ rules on language do not only control the behaviour of users but define the nature of the very identity they (are there to) represent.

A similar expression can be found in r/feminisms. This subreddit makes an explicit statement of inclusivity for all and recognises a plurality in its title that might not always be clear otherwise. Indeed, r/feminism, which uses the singular form, is described in its sidebar to be about ‘issues related to equality for women’ and sends ‘those who want to discuss men’s issues’ to r/masculism – a comparably essentialist approach to feminism which is not present at all in r/feminisms. Like r/queerradicals, r/feminisms uses some terms important to its rules that are not immediately explained, e.g. ‘check your privilege’ or ‘willfully exclusionary speech is not [welcome]’. As discussed above, the silences resulting from such lack of explanation may narrow the construction of narratives within the subreddit. However, unlike r/queerradicals, r/feminisms provides a link to a page where the moderators explain their statement on ‘privilege’ and what the term means for them and the(ir) community. Through such definitional pages in addition to rules that rely on them, r/feminisms does not only restrict those who may visit the subreddit in order to form a cohesive group identity but actively forms the key aspects of the identity they want to coalesce around their community.

It is interesting to note how the linking to other subreddits, described so far as a way to frame a subreddit’s limits (e.g. in r/askreddit), becomes a tool of a different strategy in subreddits for people who deviate from hegemonic norms. In sidebars in the latter kind of subreddits, there is a tendency for a greater overlap in the range of identities covered between the subreddit in question and the subreddit it links to. As an example, r/lgbt links to a large number of other subreddits such as r/actuallesbians, r/gay or r/transgender, all of which cover a range of topics and cater to a range of identities that are not excluded from r/lgbt in its sidebar. The subreddits linked to reinforce the group identity that r/lgbt is trying to create by connecting with a wider community of which r/lgbt positions itself to be a part, rather than linking to what is presented to be the Other as it was the case in subreddits discussed earlier. This is possible due to the links’ being presented as in accordance with the identities outlined in the sidebar for the subreddit itself, and not presented as alternatives to the subreddit’s ‘main’ target identity. If reddit is viewed, at least in some ways, as a reflection of the societies within which it was created, then the strategy of linking to other subreddits described above can be explained as a reaction to a larger heteronormative tendency within reddit. The more hegemonic subreddits discussed earlier do not need to link to a wider community to reinforce their group identity, as their identity is reflected in reddit itself. They are the unmarked norm and reinforce themselves by marking others, of which linking is only one possibility. The best way

for deviant communities to remain visible, and therefore for their identities to remain existent within the wider reddit community, is for them to link to a wider community within the unmarked heteronormative structure of reddit.

In summary, this last section captures within it a number of subreddits which, despite using varied strategies for building their group identities, all share an attempt to build an identity out of their ambition to inclusivity, whether that be by centring their identity formation on their transgression of the norms they deviate from, as in r/bisexual, or by using their rules on interaction between potential participants to form the narratives around which the group identity will coalesce, as in r/radicalqueers.

## Conclusion

As our analysis of selected subreddits shows, ‘doing identity’ is inevitable in online community spaces such as the ones reddit provides. However, this doing of identity works in different ways and can have different points of departure, as well as different effects. Identities arising online are more or less in line with wider social norms, and can be constructed in ways that are more or less accepting/supportive of deviance from internal identity norms.

However, the extent to which proclaimed support of deviance from identity norms is performatively salient is questionable. For example, while it may be declared that ‘Gay is Okay’ in r/cumsluts, that declaration is accompanied by a warning for gay people that they might not actually be welcome. Similarly, a ‘celebration’ of members of deviant groups may turn out to simply be a form of fetishisation of these groups by those from whom they deviate. Additionally, the apparent acknowledgement of deviant identities in links to other subreddits may not serve to include them within a community they could be(come) part of, but relegate them to other places, and thereby also prevent them from arising within.

Identity construction does not only mean that some identities are created while others are not; it also includes the construction of identity according to particular norms. For example, r/maledom not only naturalises heterosexuality and a binary conception of gender, but also defines the content of these gendered/sexualised identities: the two genders are not simply constructed as categories waiting to be filled, but men are associated with dominance and women with submission.

Some subreddits, particularly of communities that can be seen as deviating from wider social norms, may be very inclusive in relation to *which* sexual identities are okay, but very strict in relation to *how* users are expected to behave: someone who exhibits ‘oppressive’ behaviour cannot be a ‘radicalqueer’. Additionally, referring to ideas about what constitutes oppression that are not made explicit can be seen as similar to how hegemonic ideas of authentic masculinities and femininities are referred to in r/maledom – with the important difference that one identity is constructed from and into a position of wider social ‘normality’ and therefore dominance, while the other is constructed from and into a position of social deviance. Finally, identities can be constructed as marked and unmarked in relation to different points of reference and from different perspectives. The identities in r/gaybros and r/bros4bros are constructed as marked to an assumed gay norm insofar as they are not

simply 'gay', but 'gay bros'. However, at the same time, the identity is marked off from 'effeminate' gay identities that can be seen as deviating from wider social norms.

Our analysis has shown that the Internet is not the fertile ground for a unrestricted proliferation of deviant identities or the deconstruction of identity in general as which it has often been seen. Much rather, both deviant and non-deviant identities are policed by means of including some people/behaviours and excluding other people/behaviours. While there may be many different and sometimes rather specific identities (for example 'gay bros' and 'traps'), they are often still defined by relatively clear boundaries, associations and dissociations. The identity constructions on reddit can therefore be seen as both enabling subjects' emergence and constraining the ways in which they can emerge. While our survey of reddit sidebars has provided an overview over various ways of how identity is done on reddit, further research into particular subreddits may provide deeper insights into how identities are constructed and policed on the Internet.

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