



# Social Media Experiences of LGBTQ+ People: Enabling Feelings of Belonging

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## Abstract

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) people are experiencing increasingly varied visibility on social media due to ongoing digitalization. In this paper, I draw on social epistemology and phenomenological accounts of the digital (Frost-Arnold in: Lackey (ed) *The epistemic dangers of context collapse online*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021; Krueger and Osler in *Philos Topics* 47(2):205–231, 2019; Hine in: *Ethnography for the internet: embedded, embodied and everyday*, Bloomsbury, London, 2015), and argue that, for LGBTQ+ individuals, social media provides a space for connecting with people with shared lived experiences. This, in turn, makes it possible for social media to enable feelings of belonging. By interacting with other LGBTQ+ people online, LGBTQ+ individuals are enabled to imagine their own being in the world and to feel like they belong. This is especially important when we consider that, for LGBTQ+ identities, it may be more complicated to feel connected due to marginalization and (fear of) discrimination. This paper not only draws on literature from phenomenology and social epistemology on the digital, but also presents and analyzes interviews that were conducted in order to explore the social media experiences of LGBTQ+ people through a phenomenology and social epistemology informed framework.

**Keywords** Social media · Belonging · Feelings of belonging · LGBTQ+ · LGBTQ+ experiences · Marginalization · Online community · Online sociality

## Abbreviations

LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer,+ (and further sexual or gender minorities)
BIPoC	Black, indigenous, people of color
FTM	Female to male (outdated term to describe trans masculine experiences)

who I had always been on the web. The name also makes a difference. Sheep isn't just a nickname I used, it's part of my identity, is the part that wasn't discriminated against when I was young, that wasn't yelled at, that wasn't beaten up, that wasn't ignored... but the part that was accepted at a young age for who I was, namely as a queer person.  
(Interview Excerpt, Fy)<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Introduction

That's the beauty of the internet, you can be whoever you want. (...) The web has always been a space of action for me. My avatar was Sheep. At some point I managed to transfer this digital space of action into the offline world and so I was finally able to be (offline)

In their interview, Fy reflects on the meaning of their online avatar for their own life and identity. It seems as though digital spaces guarantee a kind of safer space in which Fy can express parts of their identity they cannot express in non-digital spaces. However, they also describe how they did eventually manage to transfer their digitally performed identity into non-digital spaces, thereby calling into question the idea that our digital social lives are completely separable from our non-digital social lives. This notion has recently been challenged in philosophical and phenomenological approaches to how social knowledge is generated online (Frost-Arnold 2021), approaches to how the internet influences our epistemic agency (Gunn and

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Lynch 2021), and most explicitly in approaches to digital sociality (see Osler 2019). The way the digital interacts with the analogue has also become a central field of interest in neighboring disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, and cognitive science.

The digital has been considered an extension of the analogue by the sociologist Hine (2015), for example (2015)—his extension works by way of digitally preserving and replicating the social structures provided in our non-digital lives. According to Hine (2015), the digital can be considered a part of our selves in the sense that it is “an extension of other embodied ways of being and acting in the world” (Hine 2015, p.41). In this way, our digital and non-digital lives are interdependent.

Philosophers engage with this notion of the digital that Hine (and others) have put forward and increasingly pay attention to online social encounters and interactions. Phenomenological or phenomenology-leaning accounts in particular have been addressing how digital spaces are embedded in our social lives, how digital intersubjectivity works, and how the digital influences our social and affective lives (Krueger and Osler 2019).<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously, there has been an increase in research on marginalization and social inequalities in digital spaces (Frost-Arnold 2021).

The intersection of these two research areas—phenomenologies of the digital and research on marginalization in digital spaces—lends itself to the question of how people with marginalized social identities are particularly affected by digital influences on their social and affective lives. This is the overarching topic this paper is located in. More specifically, the paper looks at whether and how social media enables LGBTQ+ people to feel a sense of belonging and togetherness. Social media is the part of the digital that serves best to explore digital sociality and the effect the digital has on our social and affective lives; social media is defined via its being social and is, thus, inextricably linked with sociality.

LGBTQ+ people make up an array of identities that, at least in more recent times, regularly experience significant digital publicity and digital attention, much of which is not controlled by LGBTQ+ people ourselves. At the same time, LGBTQ+ people make up an array of identities that experience marginalization, both in the analogue and in the digital. While LGBTQ+ people are attended to by all kinds of (digital) media, social media provides LGBTQ+ people with the possibility to create, publish, and push forward their own perspectives and narratives (Eickers 2023; Haimson 2021; Georgiou 2013; Mehra et al. 2004). Accordingly, social

media can help people experience a sense of togetherness (Osler 2019) and enable feelings of belonging. By seeing images and perceiving narratives of other LGBTQ+ people, a member of this social group might be enabled to imagine their own being in the world and to feel like they belong (Cavalcante 2016; Cannon et al. 2017). This sense of belonging enabled by social media is especially important when we consider people for whom it may be more complicated to feel connected based on experiences of marginalization and (fear of) discrimination on the basis of social identity.

This paper takes up the question of how the social and affective lives of people with marginalized social identities are especially affected by digital influences. The paper does so by drawing on literature from phenomenology and social epistemology on the digital, and also by presenting and analyzing the results 2003 of a qualitative study consisting of 25 interviews conducted digitally with people of the LGBTQ+ spectrum in Germany. The interviews were conducted in order to explore the social media experiences of LGBTQ+ people through an empirical framework that is informed both by phenomenology and social epistemology, particularly feminist standpoint theory (Harding 1992; Wylie 2003). The study described here does not look at social media experiences of LGBTQ+ people from an outsider perspective but researches experiences of identities from within the marginalized perspective that is analyzed, i.e., the researcher is part of the social group investigated. It is neither the intention of this paper to provide a deep dive into methodological and philosophical issues around qualitative research with marginalized communities, nor to provide an answer to the question whether an anti-oppressive approach to (qualitative) research on marginalized folks’ experiences provides for more objectivity or is ethically better. I do want to spell out a bit more what I mean by “research from within the marginalized perspective”, here, and point to some commitments I make in this paper and have made in conducting this research, however. Feminist standpoint theory emphasizes the importance of positionality, registering the epistemic position of the observer, and reflection on how that impacts the epistemic value of the inquiry. Alison Wylie, for example, concurs that “standpoint theory (...) offers a framework for understanding how, far from compromising epistemic integrity, certain kinds of diversity (cultural, racial, gender) may significantly enrich scientific inquiry, a matter of urgent practical and political as well as philosophical concern” (Wylie 2003, p.26). Quill Kukla (2006) makes the related point that some aspects of reality are best perceived via our specific social location. Sandra Harding argues that standpoint theory „sets out (...) to produce knowledge that can be *for* marginalized people (and those who would know what the marginalized can know) rather than *for* the use only of dominant groups in their projects of administering and managing the lives of marginalized people “(1992, 444f.).

<sup>2</sup> I take phenomenological approaches to be “a philosophical investigation of experience, subjectivity, and the lifeworld” (Køster and Fernandez 2021). This will be explored further in the methods section.

This centering of marginalized perspectives allows for anti-oppressive research approaches.

The study this paper analyzes was conducted on the commitment to feminist standpoint theory that the critical reflection of the specific positionality of the researcher (also as sharing lived experiences with the group investigated) provides for more integrity and substantially informs the scientific inquiry. This research moves the focus away from gaining insight on a subject from outside an ingroup, thereby risking epistemic exploitation (Berenstein 2016), to an anti-oppressive research approach. Another commitment made is that the specific positionalities of the subjects enhance the epistemic inquiry. This was ensured by using a grounded theory approach, that recognizes data as positioned in both the subjects' and the researchers' perspectives. The methods used are a way to tap into standpoints of members of groups talking about their experiences as members of those groups. These aspects together make for a "research from inside the margins" perspective, which has epistemic (and ethical) advantages over outsider perspectives. In doing so, however, I am not simply presuming the privilege, nor the uniformity, much less the essence of the LGBTQ+ voices in my sample. Nor am I saying that the social location of the interviewees alone gives them epistemic authority (see Wylie 2003). Rather, by reflecting on their social location and their access to knowledge by lived experience, the people in my sample have knowledge that directly bears on the subject under consideration. This knowledge emerges from different (offline and online) communities whose members critically examine their social locations and the ways in which these influence their lived experiences.

In the following, I explore what feelings of belonging are and how they have been approached in the literature (especially in phenomenology and emotion theory); I will then explain the methods used for the interviews portrayed in this paper and elaborate on the main theme that emerged from the interviews: social media as a space that enables feelings of belonging. This enabling of feelings of belonging may be possible due to experiencing an escape from feeling alone with one's lived experience or due to experiencing community.

## 2 Feelings of Belonging

The discipline paying the most attention to feelings of belonging has been phenomenology. Phenomenological accounts typically focus on we-experiences (Szanto and Moran 2015), intersubjectivity more broadly (Zahavi 2001), and togetherness (Osler 2019). Discussions around feelings of belonging and belongingness date back to earlier contributions in other social sciences, however. The aim of this section is to provide insight into some literature on (feelings of) belonging, togetherness, and especially to accounts of

online feelings of togetherness and belonging. The paper allows for a rather broad understanding of feelings of belonging. However, it emphasizes the affective/emotional components of belonging—since the aim of this paper, ultimately, is to draw on the lived experiences of people that are part of specific social groups (with supposedly similar phenomenological experiences).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that belonging is a fundamental human need and resource. They argue that belonging to a social group, for example, equips us with the "benefits of defending oneself and protecting one's resources against external threats (Baumeister and Leary 1995, 499). They point to differences between the need to belong and a need for affiliation and a need for intimate attachment: belonging requires both somewhat regular interaction and an affective component, such as support that promotes well-being.

Halse (2018) defines belonging as taking place at the intersection of the social and the self: "Because the belonging that arises through connectedness is an active social process of everyday life, it is necessarily always relational. This means it is produced through the co-constitutive interaction of individuals with other people, things, institutions and specific socio-cultural contexts." (Halse 2018, p. 4). Halse also emphasizes the emotional component of belonging. For her, emotion is crucial for belonging since our interpersonal relations could not be sustained if they didn't have emotional/affective components (Halse 2018). She points out how these emotional components of belonging both bring about the very feeling of belonging and, at the same time, demarcate belonging zones, i.e., the emotional components of belonging tell us where belonging begins and where it ends. However, she also concludes that these components can possibly have harmful effects: "Of course, the emotions that bring belonging into being can be positive, affirming feeling towards others in one's social collective and/or negative, destructive emotions (such loathing, intolerance and racism) toward those strangers or outsiders who do not belong to one's collective. (...) emotions-as-belonging can have risky, even dire, effects because emotions can circle back on themselves in ways that reinforce and entrench boundaries, contestation and the politics of belonging" (Halse 2018, p. 16). Halse, here, also draws on Ahmed's work on collective feelings. Ahmed (2004) argues that emotions are not merely individual responses to certain events or triggers, but more so, emotions can bring about collectives: they "work to align individuals with collectives" (Ahmed 2004, p. 26), and they create the "skin" of the collective—which works both as a potential protector, and as a demarcation.

Feelings of belonging in digital spaces have not been sufficiently explored. An exception is Krueger and Osler (2019), who argue that online spaces can be we-spaces. According to them, a we-space provides us with "a felt sense

of shared space which opens new possibilities, actions, interpersonal understanding, feelings, and connection for those involved” (Krueger and Osler 2019, 219). A we-space also creates a sense of togetherness or connectedness (Krueger and Osler 2019), which I take to be ultimately connected to feelings of belonging. This does not mean, however, that online and offline experiences and feelings of belonging necessarily feel the same.

Online and offline experiences and feelings of belonging may differ; i.e., they may emphasize different aspects of feelings of belonging. Some online experiences of belonging may feel more abstract or anonymous than offline experiences—the people are “out there” rather than sitting next to me. Thereby, online feelings of belonging may also feel less intimidating and easier to engage in. We may also still crave offline connection and experiences of belonging despite experiencing feelings of belonging through online interaction. We also “often experience being online as an extension of other embodied ways of being and acting in the world” (Hine 2015, p.41). Consequently, online experiences may not necessarily be discrete experiences of the (social) world but rather specific kinds of experiencing the (social) world. Experiencing the social world depends especially on social factors that define our standpoint in society and history: factors such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and abilities. As pointed to above, belonging is ultimately connected to being part of a social group or experiencing a ‘we-space’ (Krueger and Osler 2019). Extending this claim, I’ll argue that feelings of belonging may play a central role for specific social groups in online social experiences.

In order to gain a proper understanding of what feelings of belonging are and what they could mean for LGBTQ+ people, it is useful to combine phenomenological and psychological accounts of belonging with research on marginalized identities, and specifically, LGBTQ+ identities and (digital) belonging. It might be more complicated for marginalized identities, such as LGBTQ+ identities, to feel connected to a social group or community, and to feel like we belong since marginalization provides those identities with less possibilities for and points of connections in the first place. Feelings of belonging involve an emotional sense of security, a sense of feeling at home with others, and a sense that one can reach out for support. Finding connection and a community can elicit or allow for these feelings and may even be necessary to elicit these feelings. Here, I don’t commit to a claim about the necessity of community and connection for feelings of belonging; however, I do commit to the claim that community or connection and feelings of belonging are linked. The qualitative study I present here also suggests this and shows that finding community and connection can be linked to feelings of belonging.

Several researchers have pointed out that social media provide a tool for self-representation and community-building

especially for trans communities (Cannon et al. 2017). Cannon et al. (2017), for example, “sought to examine the lived experiences of individuals who are transgender with social media” (78) in their qualitative study. Their findings show that trans people experience social media as a site for finding connections and for building supportive networks: “All participants in the study noted the importance of finding supportive networks. Social media may offer a platform for creating and maintaining meaningful connections” (79). Importantly, Cannon et al. (2017) explicitly connect finding community to belonging and note that finding online communities increases trans individuals’ sense of belonging (cf. 81).

Cannon et al.’s findings overlap with findings by Mehra et al. (2004) and by McInroy and Craig (2015). Mehra et al.’s study (2004) “documents how sexual minorities identify the internet as an experienced social phenomenon that is closely tied to their real expectations, uses and practices (...) and how its use has had an impact on their lives in empowering and meaningful ways” (787). McInroy and Craig also hypothesized that social “media may offer increased access to information, resources, and community (...). Similarly, the internet also offers the opportunity to develop communities and support networks” (2015, 608). Their study found that LGBTQ+ people indeed identified social media as a tool to find a sense of community. Belongingness in general was also found to be important for trans people’s well-being and strength in one’s trans identity in another study by Barr et al. (2016).

### 3 Methods

Social media not only allows LGBTQ+ people to document various aspects of their queerness or transness (for example, document their transition (cf. Haimson 2018, 2021) but also to represent themselves (Eickers 2023), to network, build connection and to experience feelings of belonging.<sup>3</sup> The central research goal of this study was to learn about the digital experiences and practices of LGBTQ+ people, particularly with social media. The following research questions guided this study: How do LGBTQ+ people experience social media and how might these experiences differ from those of non-LGBTQ+ people? Which digital (social) practices do LGBTQ+ people employ on social media? These questions can be understood as embedded in a bigger framework that asks: How does digitalization affect LGBTQ+ people? This paper focuses on the first central

<sup>3</sup> Social media, here, means all kinds of different social networking sites that allow for creating a profile, connecting to other users, and dynamic conversation (Shapiro 2010).

question concerning the experiences of LGBTQ+ people with social media.

The study combines constructivist grounded theory with feminist standpoint theory, the meaning of which will be explored in what follows. Feminist standpoint theorists contend that, “those who are subject to structures of domination that systematically marginalize and oppress them may, in fact be epistemically privileged in some crucial respects. They may know different things, or know some things better than those who are comparatively privileged (socially, politically), by virtue of what they typically experience and how they understand their experience” (Wylie 2003, 26). This study commits to this claim on two levels: (1) conducting research on LGBTQ+ people with a constructivist and feminist grounded theory approach, allowing to recognize the advantaged epistemic access LGBTQ+ subjects have to LGBTQ+ issues via their positions in various associated communities, and (2) conducting research via an LGBTQ+ perspective and critically assessing my standpoint in relation to the interviewees’ social locations. I will say more on (1) now, and more on (2) in the research team section.

In the study, the social media experiences and practices of twenty-five LGBTQ+ individuals who use social media were examined. The abbreviation LGBTQ+ may appear to conflate distinct groups but this is intentional: I intend to be as inclusive as possible and recognize—with the design of this study—that many of the more general social media experiences trans people have might also be shared by queer people, by lesbian women, and so on. Though, the study recognizes that these social locations should not be conflated, nor that the abbreviation should be taken to provide a uniform perspective for all LGBTQ+ individuals. Harding (1992) cautions that mere membership, or social location, is not sufficient for conferring the epistemic advantages that feminist standpoint theory recommends. Feminist standpoint theories also caution against reifying social identities, in so far as that can lead to essentialist thinking and overlook intersectionalities. With respect to the first concern, the project is an exercise in the cultivation of standpoint, both in asking participants to reflect on their social positions, and in my own socially located effort to investigate perspectives in the community. What matters here is not a fixed social identity, but rather membership in marginalized groups and the effort to share those perspectives with a readership that may lack access to these perspectives. Crucial too, as Harding insists (1992), these individuals are members of a community. Thus, though each person is individually located, they are also engaged in a collective project of knowledge production and self-understanding. At this point it is also important to acknowledge that no intersex person was recruited for this study or that no interviewee has openly self-identified as intersex.

A grounded theory approach with a guided questions framework was utilized to explore the essence of participants’ experiences with social media. Grounded theory was employed according to constructivist (Charmaz 2005, 2006, 2014) and feminist (Keddy et al. 1996; Hesse-Biber and Flowers 2019) understandings of grounded theory. They acknowledge that data does not provide us with a sort of ready-made, neutrally produced theory but rather that the theory produced is always influenced, or constructed, by how researchers and participants understand society and the researched phenomena and through the interaction between researcher and subjects. According to Charmaz (2006), it is the interaction between researcher(s), subjects, and research process that construct theories. The researcher is not considered to be an unbiased observer, according to this framework, but as actively involved in theory construction. At the same time, according to Hesse-Biber and Flowers, “grounded theory serves to elucidate women’s concerns and those of other oppressed groups (...)” because “feminist research is aimed at exploring subjugated knowledge” and as it “aligns with feminist research in its attention to raw data (the voices of marginalized populations (...))” (p. 499). That is, taken together, theoretical claims emerging from the present data are always a reflection of the different social locations the research subjects find themselves in, as well as a reflection of the standpoint the researcher embodies (in relation to the social locations of the subject). Elucidating knowledge of oppressed communities via the social locations of their members, i.e., using their perspectives as starting points for epistemic inquiry, engaging with those critically, and examining the researcher’s standpoint in relation to those perspectives reflects the feminist standpoint theory claims pointed to in the introduction of this paper. As mentioned, Harding promotes an approach that begins analysis from the perspective of members of oppressed or marginalized groups. According to her, doing so ensures a more critical epistemic inquiry than analyses that are based on research principles that are supposedly value-neutral and not reflective of any particular social perspective (Harding 1991, 1992). The present study follows Harding and other feminist standpoint theorists in opposing views that purport the emergence of epistemic authority through social locations alone. That is, epistemic authority is not given by being member of a certain group or community (see Harding 1992; Wylie 2003)—here: LGBTQ+—but is achieved by critical reflection and interaction with one’s respective communities. Instead, the study critically reflects lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals who are part of different offline and online communities that give rise to epistemic resources, and who critically reflect on their social locations (also in the interviews).

The constructivist and feminist grounded theory approach employed here is further enriched by taking

phenomenological approaches to qualitative research into account. The study depicted here has not been based on phenomenological approaches to qualitative research, however. There is a connection between grounded theory and phenomenology, though, that has been acknowledged in the literature. Adele E. Clarke (2019), for example, points out that a range of qualitative approaches, including constructivist grounded theory, “dwells (...) from autoethnography and phenomenology with emphases on lived experience” (p. 21). Phenomenological approaches may be considered “a philosophical investigation of experience, subjectivity, and the lifeworld” (Køster and Fernandez 2021). Køster and Fernandez explain further that sometimes, phenomenologically grounded qualitative research is only considered phenomenological because it looks at “experience from the first-person perspective” (Køster and Fernandez 2021). While I think it is important to point at phenomenological approaches allowing us to explore research themes through the research participants sharing their lived experiences (Creswell 2013), the particular study here does more than that. The study was designed on the basis of researching experiences of marginalized identities from within the marginalized perspective, that is, lived experiences that are of central relevance to the study are shared between interviewees and interviewer. Ravn (2023) as well Høffding and Martiny (2016) point to further interactive elements in the generation of data. Ravn (2023) argues that (some) phenomenological approaches to qualitative research take into account that the “data generated form part of a co-generative process also involving, as a minimum, the interviewer and his or her ability to facilitate still richer descriptions of experiences “ (p.112). These considerations phenomenological approaches to qualitative research make, together with considerations from constructivist grounded theory and feminist standpoint epistemology, informed the choice of a guided questions framework to be utilized for the interviews. Here, the guided questions framework means the interviews were not fully planned out before being conducted but only structured through a few main guiding questions. This gave the interviewees the chance to speak as freely as possible about their experiences with social media while still allowing the researcher to connect the interview process back to the guiding question.

Ravn (2023) also takes into account how phenomenological theory informs qualitative analysis. While the main theme (belonging), here, emerges from the data, this informed the choice to engage with phenomenological literature on belonging and the literature, then again, informed the discussion of the data.

### 3.1 The Research Team

In the following, I will say a few things about the research team, and elaborate more on the author’s standpoint and its relevance for this study and paper.

The author was supported in the study by two student assistants, Thale Reitz and Michelle Tannrath. The interviews were transcribed with the help of one of these two student assistants. One assistant also helped in recruiting interviewees. The research idea, development of the interviews, coding, analysis and interpretation of results, and writing is the author’s work. All involved had prior experience with qualitative research and indicated professional interest in LGBTQ+ experiences. During the interviews, the identity overlaps and shared lived experiences allowed the author to build a trustworthy connection to the interviewees so that they felt comfortable to share personal experiences.

As mentioned, this study and paper commit to the mentioned feminist standpoint theory claims by (1) (elaborated on above), and (2) conducting research via an LGBTQ+ perspective and critically assessing the author’s standpoint in relation to the interviewees’ social locations. First, the author is trans and queer and has made this transparent in the interviews. Second, the author recognizes the importance of their social positioning for this study and the ways in which this may both enrich the epistemic inquiry—for example, in enabling interviewees to share their experiences more freely and thereby generating better access to epistemic resources, and in having access to (some of) the concepts and scripts, i.e., epistemic tools and resources, employed by interviewees—as well as how this may limit the epistemic inquiry—for example, in inhabiting a *specific* social position on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Unlike some empiricist approaches, which have been criticized by Harding (1992) for re-inscribing value-free conceptions of objectivity, the aim is not to remove bias, but to allow the author’s standpoint to guide research. Throughout the research process, I have critically examined the specific social locations I inhabit as well as the standpoint through which I interact with interviewees, including in the interviews. When writing the discussion section of this paper, for example, I have double-checked with the interviews portrayed whether this is really in line with what the interviewees said and to what extent the knowledge produced here is influenced by my standpoint. In addition to ongoing critical reflection on my standpoint throughout the research process, I acknowledge that my standpoint in relation to the subjects’ social location informs the interpretation of interviews and theorizing.

### 3.2 Interviewees

25 German-speaking social media users on the LGBTQ+ spectrum were interviewed for this study.

Interviewees were recruited using advertising on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Potential interviewees were qualified using the following criteria: (1) they must identify themselves as persons who are LGBTQ+; (2) they must be older than age 18 years; (3) they must be willing to participate in one semi-structured interview. The final sample (N = 25) consisted of individuals who self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans (including non-binary), queer, or any combination thereof. The age of participants ranged between 21 and 45 years. The research team secured verbal consents from the participants at the time of the interview. Interviews were anonymized to protect the participants' identities. Interviews were conducted via cleanfeed, a digital audio recording software, lasting on average 60 min. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The interview data was analyzed using an open-coding approach, allowing themes to emerge from the data (Charmaz 2014). I coded all data using line-by-line analysis, then conducted focused and thematic coding to identify recurring patterns and themes and to understand how the different sub-themes are connected to each other (Charmaz 2014).

## 4 Results

A main theme that emerged from the interviewee's experiences with social media is that social media is considered a space that enables feelings of belonging through providing the opportunity to experience community and to find safer spaces for freely exploring and living one's LGBTQ+ identity. This main theme included several subthemes, which are categorized here as the subtheme *escaping aloneness*, and the subtheme *finding community*. Both subthemes include references to feelings of belonging. In the discussion section, I will argue that, based on these results, social media seems to enable feelings of belonging and togetherness for LGBTQ+ people. The enabling of feelings of belonging may be possible due to experiencing an escape from feeling alone with one's lived experience or due to experiencing community. This, in turn, may also contribute to creating a sense of one's own identity and to shape one's identity.

### 4.1 Escaping Aloneness

A majority of the interviewees noted that networking or connecting with other LGBTQ+ people via social media is central for creating feelings of belonging and for escaping

or avoiding loneliness. This was especially true for interviewees who do not live in big cities with established in-person LGBTQ+ networks, community spaces, and cultural sites. "Networking via social media can be essential for experiencing a feeling of belonging for trans people, especially for those of us whose access to non-digital spaces is limited, like people who do not live in big cities with central LGBTQ+ networks and organizations" (Eickers 2023, 235) (see also Haimson 2021). This becomes especially apparent when considering one of the interviewees, Ted, who emphasized that social media is extremely important to him because it was the only way for him to find connections to other LGBTQ+ people:

Instagram in particular is a source of representation for me. (...) For me it is a very important source because I can see that other people struggle with the same issues... and there is no other way for me to experience that. So, feeling represented is important to me so I don't feel so alone with some questions and issues that are on my mind.

Connecting and networking does not just entail passively consuming content on social media; it also entails actively contributing to the content being shown. For example, Bo, a queer person in their early twenties shared how they escape aloneness and create feelings of belonging for themselves (and possibly others) by actively using social media and sharing content: "I use social media because I want to share my life with people who are queer. I feel more seen and comfortable and no longer feel like I'm isolated". Bo's depiction of their social media experience seems very similar to Qim's lived experience. Qim, a 30-year-old nonbinary person, shares how their lived experience before social media made them feel like they did not belong and like something was wrong with them. Social media, then, enabled them to experience feelings of belonging:

It was just a good feeling not to feel like I don't belong anymore. Suddenly there were thousands of people who felt the same way... and I grew up thinking that somehow I was wrong. And this feeling alone gave me the strength to be true to myself and continue to dig up what is going on (...) It was important. There were experiences I'd rather not have had but despite everything it felt good back then. Now everything's much more open. Nowadays there is Instagram and you see diverse advertisements everywhere. I find it easier now. Society has also become more open, but back then, when I grew up, you didn't have anything. You felt wrong and then suddenly—on social media—you weren't wrong anymore.

## 4.2 Finding Community

For some people, connecting via social media is also an entrance into new digital and in-person worlds that haven't been explored before. Social media enables LGBTQ+ people to find community. This is supported by the findings of Cannon et al.'s study (2017), where participants also emphasized the role community-finding plays for LGBTQ+ people on social media: "The importance of finding a community where one could be accepted, validated, and empowered echoed throughout the participants' reflections" (Cannon et al. 2017, p. 76).

Suki, a trans woman in her twenties, for example, told me she met the first other trans person she knew online first, then set up a meeting in-person, which, then again, resulted in her connecting with many other trans people in person:

I met a trans person for the first time when I was 16...in a chat. (...) I then wrote to the person a bit and then we met (...). The fact that the person came out in front of me was such a decisive moment that even at the beginning I didn't quite know whether it was me too. Then I started to think about whether that might be a good fit for me... (...) A few years later, through the person's friends, I also got into a queer group of friends.

Suki's experience captures what other interviewees also described: merging online and offline communities and finding community through social media. In Suki's case, this first online connection with a trans person contributed to her finding her own trans identity and resulted in her finding offline community, too. Qim's interview also reflects finding in-person community with the help of social media connections. They also describe, however, that they do experience social media platforms as spaces where community can be created and experienced. Qim also points to the epistemic benefits such online communities might have—such as gaining knowledge and thereby shaping one's own identity or helping to accept one's own identity:

There was a kind of community on Instagram without people really knowing each other. But there was a power that was passed on and then also helped me to accept that not everything is always clear. (...) Instagram and the people on there being so open really helped me realize there are many more gender options.

Many interviewees also particularly emphasized the role specific social media communities played in their lives. That is, often, when talking about LGBTQ+ social media communities, we don't necessarily talk about people who are out and who have a large follower base. We may also talk about private groups that revolve around specific topics and that only specific people have access to—for example, we may talk about groups or threads where trans people in a

specific country or even city exchange experiences with transition processes. One such example is a platform called FTM (female to male) portal. FTM portal specifies in offering a platform for peer-to-peer exchange for trans men and trans masculine people. Here, photos of surgery progress can be shared and discussed, and transition-related questions can be asked in the forum. The platform is a specific or closed space because it is German only, it is moderated by admins, and it is fairly restricted in terms of who can register and participate.

Another example, and one that is quite different from the FTM portal, has been brought up by interviewee Fy. Fy, who's in their 40 s, shared their experience with old chat servers they have been active on for a long time. Those chat servers have a special meaning to them because they experience the kind of community there as different from a more public community building that takes place on their public twitter account, for example.

I still have my old chat servers that have been hanging around for 20–25 years. So I'm still on the same chat servers as back then. (...) There are a lot of intimate thoughts shared there... and the people on there seem very familiar with one another and connected. New people don't join anymore. It's a different familiarity, it's a very closed community.

Fy emphasizes the close familiarity and connection taking place on these old chat servers. In this specific context, themes such as LGBTQ+ (self-)representation and visibility have a different meaning as they do not depend on big follower bases or content engagement. Rather, they can be experienced and explored more directly in what is described as a closed space. Fy also describes how these chat servers were the only opportunity for a lot of people to learn about gay sex and sexuality 20–25 years ago. They also contrast the intimate knowledge exchange on these chat servers to how young LGBTQ+ people today can access information quite freely and easily because of how offline and online spaces have merged and also because of the vast variety of options online.

## 5 Discussion

The study presented in this paper aimed at exploring the digital experiences and practices of LGBTQ+ people, particularly their experiences with and on social media. The study serves to better understand the lived experiences of digitization and particularly of social media for specific social groups that are marginalized, such as LGBTQ+ people. This may contribute to understanding how marginalization operates in digital spaces, and to understanding the phenomenology of digital spaces.



The interviewees spoke about the importance of LGBTQ+ representation on social media and the possibilities increased social media representation creates for LGBTQ+ people; about being able to find community on social media for networking, exchange of information (e.g., on transition or queer-friendly spaces), and to defeat feeling alone. In the results section, I have identified the main theme and different subthemes that emerged in the study. In the following I will argue that the results suggest—in accordance with current literature on belonging and digitality—that social media enables feelings of belonging and togetherness for LGBTQ+ people. The feelings of belonging may be experienced via or as an escape from feeling alone with one's lived experience or as experiencing community. Feelings of belonging may also help with figuring out one's own identity. However, I will also point to the limitations digital spaces have regarding intersubjectivity and particularly regarding affective intersubjective phenomena such as feelings of belonging.

### 5.1 Enabling Feelings of Belonging

LGBTQ+ people seem to enjoy a wide range of visibility due to ongoing digitalization processes while, at the same time, still experiencing digital and non-digital marginalization. Some of us have big social media accounts doing activist work, sharing transition stories, or sharing queer and trans art—some of those accounts have a large international following of which many are LGBTQ+ followers. LGBTQ+ visibility on social media matters because social media can help people experience a sense of togetherness (Osler 2019) and to create feelings of belonging. The interviewees noted that social media representation of LGBTQ+ people was important to them and helped them feel less alone with their identity or their figuring out their identity. By seeing images and perceiving narratives of other LGBTQ+ people, I might be enabled to imagine my own being in the world and to feel like I belong (Cavalcante 2016; Cannon et al. 2017). That is, representation and visibility matter for social media's ability to enable feelings of belonging—the easier it is to find other LGBTQ+ people on social media, the more likely I may be to connect to them and to be able to experience belonging (especially if I do not have offline points of connection).

An increase in representation and visibility of LGBTQ+ people on social media needs to be treated with care, however. LGBTQ+ people occupy marginalized positions within society; those may be reproduced on social media, especially since social media posts often has a larger audience than in person encounters. That is, LGBTQ+ content is not only accessible to those it is important for and to those who appreciate it but also to those who do not understand and/or despise it. Thus, the very increase in visibility

itself may lead to an increase in exposure to discrimination and marginalization. A discussion of the details of the risks and benefits of social media for LGBTQ+ people goes beyond the scope of this paper. This paper is particularly concerned with LGBTQ+ people's feelings of belonging enabled through social media; for such feelings of belonging, representation and visibility—as the interviews show—are necessary and beneficial because they ease the process of finding other LGBTQ+ people on social media. This is especially important when considering the marginalization of LGBTQ+ people again: due to marginalization, there are less opportunities for LGBTQ+ people to experience feelings of belonging or a sense of togetherness, as pointed to in a previous section. Social media might contribute to filling this gap by enabling LGBTQ+ people to interact with one another regardless of whether they have come out and regardless of their location.

Social media creates a space for exploration and thereby provides both a space for connecting with others and a space for self-representation (Eickers 2023). This space of intersection of the social and the self, in turn, makes it possible for social media to be involved in creating experiences of feelings of belonging. This is how Halse (2018) understands belonging to work. As pointed out in a previous section, belonging “arises through connectedness” (Halse 2018, p. 4). Social media, thus, enables (feelings of) belonging through providing a space for connectedness. Emotion and affect are central to belonging, Halse argues. This was also reflected in the interviews. Most of the interviewees have elaborated on feeling less alone due to having found online community on social media, some even mentioned experiencing happiness and feelings of relief associated with connecting with other LGBTQ+ people online.

There are more benefits to social media carrying the capacity to enable feelings of belonging for specific groups. Online spaces dedicated to specific communities, and the very possibility of creating community—and through that, feelings of belonging—have epistemic benefits. Such spaces contribute to the production of specific knowledge important for the well-being and survival of community members (e.g., information about gender transition, information about LGBTQ+ health, information about local LGBTQ+ support). According to Alison Jaggar (2004), closed or defined communities have always been important in a lot of contexts for knowledge production: “It is not only feminists or even moral thinkers whose systems of ideas have been developed in the context of small personal communities united by adherence to certain beliefs or methods. (...) All these small (...) communities functioned as intellectual crucibles in which systems of ideas were explored and elaborated.” (Jaggar 2004, p. 13). Jaggar goes on to argue that such closed communities have been of special importance for marginalized topics and marginalized people: “When the ideas

involved are heretical by the standards of the larger society, such communities provide emotional as well as intellectual support for their members” (Jaggar 2004, p. 14). In stating the importance (“the epistemological indispensability”) of closed communities, Jaggar acknowledges not only the role closed communities play in knowledge production, but also the supportive and affective roles the very communities themselves play. Jaggar’s argument may bear stronger significance for specific social media formats such as closed forums or groups that are not accessible to outsiders. But the argument might also be applied to closed communities in a broader sense: small social media accounts that are not technically closed (meaning they are publicly accessible) may function as closed communities in that the followers form a closed community with the respective account on the basis of shared identities and reflection thereof in posts by the account and the followers’ interaction with these posts.

Karen Frost-Arnold (2021) applies Jaggar’s argument to digital communities. She argues that, online too, marginalized communities are often subject to epistemic injustice and epistemic violence and that, thus, “there are good reasons why members of marginalized groups create spaces and communities in which to have conversations amongst themselves” (Frost-Arnold 2021, 442). But closed communities are not only important for marginalized groups because they can help shelter from epistemic injustice and violence, but also because they can offer affective and social support. Reconsider Ahmed’s (2004) work on the ‘skin’ of communities: emotions serve to keep a community together: emotions such as feelings of belonging contribute to knowing who’s part of the community and who’s not part of the community, thereby creating the community’s ‘skin’.

The argument from closed communities connects well to phenomenological accounts arguing for online spaces to have the ability to be we-spaces (Krueger and Osler 2019). Krueger and Osler argue for the incorporation of online spaces into our everyday social lives and for the influence of online spaces and online sociality on our affective lives. But there is even more to online spaces, according to them: “(...) we can experience a more general sense of togetherness with others in the form of an online we-space. Online we-spaces not only engineer specific affects but create a deeper sense of sharing space and being connected with others, even though they are physically apart.” (Krueger and Osler 2019, p. 219). That is, online we-spaces provide us with a sense of togetherness or connectedness (Krueger and Osler 2019), and thus seem to be ultimately connected to feelings of belonging. Krueger and Osler extend the concept of we-spaces to online we-spaces as they consider we-spaces to be based on a felt sense of togetherness rather than a mere physical sharing of space: “we-spaces refer to a felt sense of sharing a space of possibility” (Krueger and Osler 2019, p. 220). Online we-spaces may offer possibilities and interaction and connection

with others—just like non-digital we-spaces. That is, following Krueger and Osler, it is possible for online spaces such as social media to provide us with community and connection, and to enable feelings of belonging and togetherness.

While research on the phenomenology of online communities can learn a lot from research on epistemic communities and especially research on closed communities, this is not to say that online we-spaces, for example, need to be closed spaces necessarily. As has become evident in the interviews, feelings of belonging may occur in all kinds of spaces, some of which may be considered closed spaces (such as the old chat server example), but others cannot be considered closed spaces (such as Instagram/more public social media platforms).

## 5.2 Limitations to Belonging

Some researchers working on digitization and its effects have pointed to limits of digitization, for example considering our ability to interact with one another in digital spaces—the argument here might be that digital spaces cannot provide a proper substitute for physical togetherness. Osler (2019, 2021) identifies such views as being pessimistic about online communities; they “fear that the internet erodes community” (Osler 2019, p. 572). In this section, I want to look at limitations to belonging that may occur in connection with social media, or online spaces more broadly. That is, here, I ask: Is the belonging and community enabled by social media comparable to offline belonging and offline community? Are there limits to the quality of belonging enabled by social media?

Dotson (2017) points out that, in digital spaces, sociality, community, and belonging seem to shift from being a public good to being a private responsibility:

“Although it is unclear to what extent people may be lonelier today than in the past, most scholars recognize that social activity has become increasingly individualized and fragmented; that is, people experience their sociality more and more often through diffuse, atomistic networks of specialized social ties rather than in bounded, densely woven, placerooted, and economically, politically, and morally rich communities. They experience social connection as individuals accessing and moving through technological networks rather than as an almost indelible feature of everyday life. Individuals more often correspond via Facebook or attend ad-hoc “meetups” than join local associations or frequent neighborhood cafés. Social ties are more diffuse and segregated; community appears more as a friends list than as a place to which one can point.” (Dotson 2017, p. 2)

This shift in responsibility particularly affects belonging, according to Dotson. Digital spaces do not provide for “thick communities” (Dotson 2017), meaning communities that are important for and contribute to sustainable (feelings of) belonging. The thickness of a community, according to Dotson, seems to rely on factors such as reliability and availability. When belonging becomes individualized (through digitization), communities can no longer provide the “thickness” needed for belonging and for beneficial effects for those in the communities. Dotson brings in studies on well-being and health, noting that, while such studies show that thick communities have a positive effect on people’s health, individualization has a negative effect: “As one small Pennsylvania town became less communal and more individualistic, rates of heart attack and old-age dementia quickly rose in tandem” (Dotson 2017, p. 19). It remains an open question, however, whether online communities are really experienced as thin (or non-thick) communities, as communities that are only loosely connected and cannot offer the same support a tightly woven neighborhood community can offer. The very need for online communities, especially for marginalized people, seems to stem at least partly from the lack of in-person communities based on shared experiences or the lack of connectedness in in-person communities.

The interviewees in the study presented here were not naively optimistic about how social media benefits their lives by way of enabling feelings of belonging. Rather, in all the interviews there was a critical discussion of what online communities can provide, and of the necessary connection between online and offline community lives and lived experiences. This becomes very apparent in our interviewee Bo’s reflections. While Bo shared that social media has enabled them to feel like they belong (to certain LGBTQ+ communities, and to society), and has decreased their feelings of isolation, they are also skeptical of just how “thick” a community social media can provide. They reflect on how experiencing community on social media differs from experiencing community in person:

I do believe that you don’t really get to know people on social media and aren’t that close to them, no matter how vulnerable they make themselves there. It has a different quality. I think the social media contacts help to survive, but they don’t replace the real contacts.

Bo’s reflections on social media communities and Dotson’s analysis of thick communities connect to research centering feelings of belonging and belongingness, such as Halse’s (2018) research on belonging and Ahmed’s (2004) research on collective feelings. As discussed in a previous section, according to Halse (2018) and Ahmed (2004), feelings of belonging do not only provide us with community and togetherness, but they also determine and reinforce boundaries, defining who is part of a certain community

and who isn’t, creating a demarcation of togetherness. This may be enhanced on social media as content is curated and only specific parts of one’s identity may be represented. That is, feelings of belonging enabled via social media may work to secure specific social (online) connections (as recognized by Bo in the interview) but as these may be tied to a specific identity or specific social practices, the social media connections, in turn, may not achieve the same quality as offline connections. Such “non-thick connections” may also bear greater risk of drawing strong demarcations against out groups, as pointed out by Ahmed (2004) and Halse (2018). Multiple interviewees recognized that online connection and offline connection are of different quality, giving further support to thinking that social media rather provides for a non-thick community than a thick community.

These limitations for feelings of belonging and togetherness in online spaces, however, do not render the results of the study presented here, or more optimistic work on online we-spaces useless. Rather, the limitations remind us of what the nature of specific community spaces is: there are online spaces for LGBTQ+ communities that exist specifically (or only) for people who are part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum—such as closed forums that serve as safer spaces. These spaces will exclude non-LGBTQ+ people but that’s the point of creating such communities (in order to ensure safer spaces). Such closed communities are necessary for the well-being (and perhaps even survival) of their members (cf. Jaggar 2004; Fricker 2007; Frost-Arnold 2021). Non-closed social media spaces—say, the Instagram page of a queer person with a huge amount of followers—may not work in the same way a closed forum does and, thus, are more restricted in enabling feelings of belonging in the first place. However, the interviews reflected that LGBTQ+ influencers and comparable social media spaces occupy an important role in online community-making and belonging as well: often-times, big social media accounts serve as entry points to discovering one’s communities, thereby working as gateways to belonging. We might, then, hypothesize, that different social media spaces have different functions in enabling feelings of belonging, while also acknowledging that the belongingness created cannot replace offline belongingness and community.

The limitations remind us not to approach the existence of online communities in an overly optimistic manner, such as assuming that online communities will take care of creating feelings of belonging and, thus, make in person togetherness optional. That is also not what the results of the study analyzed here show. The interviewees were rather conscious about the limits and possible risks online communities bring along, especially considering the role social media plays in providing for thick communities. We can see this in Bo’s interview (example above); Bo rightly remarks that online communities do not replace in person contacts. Bo further reflects on this by

differentiating between different kinds of online sociality and on the importance of having in person contacts:

It depends on what form of contact there is with social media people. (...) I do believe that there are real contacts and conversations. And then they come closer to a contact in real life, and it is often the case that people then meet in real life and maybe would never have found the connection otherwise (...).

A further limitation was pointed to by Fy in their interview. When telling about the different platforms Fy uses, they remark that there are some platforms they cannot use because they don't understand the norms of using them. For that reason, they specify, they also don't want to use these platforms, as they think it may be inappropriate for somebody their age and, thus, may be embarrassing to use a platform without knowledge of the respective norms and practices.

I can't use Snapchat. That's not my medium; I don't understand the filters and functions. I also don't use TikTok. I think that every generation has their own media and I have no business engaging in TikTok or Snapchat. I leave those to young people. No, really, when I see older people using these platforms, I just find it cringy. And I don't want to embarrass myself.

That is, there may be generational divisions with respect to which social media platforms are being used and how they are being used. Such divisions may also be present along other lines of division—particularly class and disability—depending on the accessibility of different social media platforms. Later in the interview, Fy points to the existence of different specialized online spaces on different social media platforms for LGBTIQ+ people—that is, there may be spaces for finding representation, looking for friends, discussion spaces, and spaces for seeking sexual encounters. Depending on the specific identities one inhabits within the LGBTIQ+ spectrum, some of these spaces may be more salient and more accessible. Gay men, Fy emphasizes, are mostly active on online spaces designed for seeking sexual encounters. Feelings of belonging may play a role here, too, as we can certainly feel like we belong in specific sexual cultures, and there may be historical reasons for that. But those who are not interested in such highly sexualized spaces may also feel disconnected from their own community due to a lack of online spaces that do not revolve around sex. This may extend well beyond online spaces and feelings of belonging, however. This paper cannot address the full picture about the limits of social media in enabling feelings of belonging or in enabling community. Furthermore, future inquiry into these research questions would benefit from incorporating quantitative research.

Taking the lived experiences of marginalized individuals—seriously, here, implies that the feelings of belonging enabled through social media are not unreal, fake, or incomparable to feelings of belonging created through in person intersubjectivity. Dotson (2017) may be interpreted as saying as much when she says, for example, that individuals engaging in online communities “*attempt to obtain a sense of social belonging through their Facebook connections*” (Dotson 2017, 18; emphasis author). But the lived experiences and particularly the feelings of belonging experienced by the interviewees in the study analyzed here were expressed through careful reflection, were put in context, and were critically reflected upon. Thus, the lived experiences of the interviewees (and those in other studies, e.g., Haimson 2018, 2021; Haimson et al. 2021) are not properly captured by describing them as attempts to obtain feelings of belonging; rather, they are real experiences of feelings of belonging. In addition, the claim of this paper is not that any general human need for belonging gets satisfied through being on social media and through (actively) engaging in online communities. This paper's claim is more subtle: for LGBTIQ+ people, who can be considered marginalized, social media can enable feelings of belonging and togetherness. Following that, one might ask whether what's enabled by social media is real belonging or whether online belonging is real belonging. This question is beyond the scope of this paper and needs to be dealt with separately. For the sake of this paper, I have considered online belonging to be real belonging, even if online belonging may be a specific kind of experience that differs from other kinds of belonging (see section on feelings of belonging).

### 5.3 Implications for Future Research

Future theoretical, empirical, and interdisciplinary work may move the focus from LGBTIQ+ people to other marginalized groups, may focus in more detail on one of the subgroups included in the LGBTIQ+ acronym, may ask questions that expand the research frame of the study presented here, and may look at whether feelings of belonging are better supported by some social media platforms than others. There are a lot of possibilities to expand the study presented here and to further investigate the lived experiences of LGBTIQ+ people or of other marginalized groups with social media. Issues worth investigating in this respect are: how is belonging via social media more or less accessible to different members of the LGBTIQ+ spectrum due to intra-community marginalization—meaning the marginalization of, for example, disabled or BIPoC individuals in LGBTIQ+ communities? What are the implications for online belonging and connection of censoring or content limitation of LGBTIQ+ people on social media platforms? And are feelings of belonging better supported by some social media platforms than others?

Future research on these questions may also include quantitative research methods or employing a specific phenomenological concept for interpreting research results (such as ‘we-spaces’).

## 6 Conclusion

This paper explored whether and how social media enables feelings of belonging and togetherness for LGBTQ+ people. The paper discussed social epistemology and phenomenological and accounts of the digital (Frost-Arnold 2021; Krueger and Osler 2019; Hine 2015), and argued that, for LGBTQ+ individuals, social media provides a space for connecting with people with shared lived experiences and thereby may enable feelings of belonging. The paper also presented the results of a qualitative study—interviews that were conducted to explore the lived social media experiences of LGBTQ+ people—and analyzed these within a phenomenology and social epistemology informed viewpoint.

Social media is inextricably linked to sociality—we interact, feel, share, and connect online. LGBTQ+ people face both increasing visibility on social media and online as well as offline marginalization. Interviewees in the study presented in this paper saw social media as a resource for finding community and, through that, as a space where they can explore being connected to other LGBTQ+ people. Social media provides LGBTQ+ people with the possibility to create, publish, and push forward their own perspectives and narratives and, as a result, can help people experience community and a sense of togetherness, and enable feelings of belonging. By seeing images and perceiving narratives of other LGBTQ+ people, individuals are enabled to imagine their own being in the world and to feel like they belong.

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