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“Yes, that is me in HEELS! #LGBT #selflove”: Exploring LGBT Identity, Disclosure and Authenticity in Social Media Posts

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“Yes, that is me in HEELS! #LGBT #selflove”:

Exploring LGBT Identity, Disclosure and Authenticity in Social Media Posts



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Master Thesis Child & Adolescent Psychology

Abstract

To this day LGBT and queer communities experience marginalisation, and discrimination and remain understudied and underrepresented across research. Consequently, there is a lack of resources, education and protection for these groups. It is necessary to represent their voices and lived experiences in research. Studying LGBT and queer populations is essential to understanding how they cope with these adversities. Research on LGBT communities in the context of self-love could give insights into how they learn to overcome internalised prejudice and cultivate self-love and authentic self-expression despite marginalisation. Individuals turn to social media to explore and share aspects of their queer identities. Therefore, this study aims to highlight the voices of LGBT individuals to uncover how they navigate and express their LGBT identity development. This study focuses on social media narratives to understand protective factors like authenticity and positive LGBT identity within the context of self-love.

To achieve this, this study used a mixed-methods cross-sectional approach. By performing a qualitative content analysis, we identified themes across social media posts from Instagram and X (formerly known as Twitter) within the year 2019 that contained the hashtags #lgbt and #selflove (n = 723). The study also included a quantitative Chi-square analysis to investigate the association between posts that contain authentic views of the self and posts that 1) mention positive LGBT identity and 2) contain a personal tone of the post.

Results of the content analysis revealed that the top five themes out of 26 themes discussed within #lgbt and #selflove posts were: 1) posts disclosing a personal story, 2) posts talking about identity pride and 3) identity integration, 4) posts written in a prosocial and 5) encouraging manner. Results also showed a statistically significant association about positive LGBT identity and authentic self-perception. No statistically significant association was found between posts about authentic self-perception and personal tone of post.

The study brings forward the conversations that are shared within the context of LGBT and self-love on social media posts. It underscores the significance of social media as a place to express LGBT or queer identities and foster community support. It highlights the importance of research and mental health environments focusing on helping LGBT and queer individuals cultivate self-love and embrace their identities, which have often been neglected or associated with feelings of shame and discrimination.

Key Words: LGBT, LGBT identity, queer, self-love, authenticity, social media, disclosure, content analysis, Chi-square

Layman's Abstract

LGBT and queer communities face discrimination and marginalization and are often overlooked and underrepresented in research. Consequently, their unique experiences and challenges are poorly understood. To address this gap, it is important to listen to their stories and experiences. The goal of this study was to give voice to LGBT individuals by exploring the conversations on social media posts that are about LGBT experiences within the context of self-love. Practicing self-love challenges harmful narratives that suggest queer individuals are unworthy of love and respect. It reclaims identities, affirming that they deserve care and celebration. This concept operates on both personal and collective levels, allowing individuals to embrace their true selves while fostering a sense of community.

The study looked at public Instagram and X posts that were published in the year 2019 that contained the hashtags #lgbt and #selflove. The study was particularly interested in the content of these social media posts and what they discussed. The study also looked at the connection between posts that talked about authenticity and posts that 1) talked about positive LGBT identity, and 2) disclosed personal stories.

We found that the most popular themes were 1) personal stories, 2) pride in identity, 3) integrating one's queer identity in one's life, and 4) support and encouragement for others. Our analysis revealed a strong link between positive identity and authenticity in posts. However, we did not find a significant connection between the tone of the posts and their authenticity.

This study highlights the importance of social media as a platform for LGBT individuals to express their identities and a place to foster self-love. The findings highlight the need for more research and mental health care that truly listens and gives voice to these individuals to increase understanding and support for LGBT and queer individuals.

“Yes, that is me in HEELS! #LGBT #selflove”: Exploring LGBT Identity, Disclosure and Authenticity in Social Media Posts

“Good Luck, Babe!” - Queer Legacies and Cultural Impacts

"After two years of nonstop, government-fueled homophobia and transphobia, the fastest growing musician in the world is a lesbian drag queen making music about being a lesbian" (Bernstein, 2024).

This is a quote from an Instagram post about the rise of the American singer, songwriter and drag-queen Chappell Roan (famous for her number 1 hit “Good Luck, Babe!”). The post opens a critical conversation about the profound footprints queer artists have left on shaping our culture. It also emphasizes the ongoing struggle for queer visibility and their recognition and acceptance in mainstream media and society amidst persistent homophobia and transphobia. In every documented culture, homosexuality and non-binary gender expression have been present, regardless of whether they were accepted, understood or persecuted (Morris, 2021). The history of LGBT movements reflects a prolonged and continuous struggle against the discrimination and criminalization of individuals whose identity might today fall under the umbrella term LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans) (Hu, 2020).

Narratives: Cultural Frameworks

Dominant Cultural Narratives: Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity

To this day, our societal contexts still privilege heterosexuality as the norm, a phenomenon known as heteronormativity, which marginalizes those who do not conform to these standards (Meyer 2003). Similarly, cisnormativity, the unquestioned expectation that all people are assigned to a binary gender, further perpetuates the notion that non-binary gender identities, transgender identities and expressions are “abnormal” (Bradford & Syed, 2019). Despite advancements towards equality and inclusion, it remains painfully evident in contemporary society that individuals identifying as LGBT or queer are still targets of violence and hate crimes (Morris, 2021). Instances such as the Orlando mass shooting in 2016 (Morris, 2021) and policy changes aimed to restrict the rights, particularly by limiting resources, financial and medical aid for trans youth (American Civil Liberties Union, 2024) highlight the challenges faced by queer individuals. Particularly LGBT youth were found to experience higher rates of depression (Almeida et al., 2009) and elevated risks of suicidal thoughts and attempts (Almeida et al., 2009; Haas et al., 2011; Pompili et al., 2014) with 36% to 65% of trans youth having considered suicide within one year (Bauer et al., 2013; Veale et al., 2015). Research in Canada and the United States shed light on the high rates of verbal abuse (59% to 81%) and physical abuse (24% to 38%) experienced by LGBT youth due to their sexual orientation or gender expression (D’Augelli, et al., 2002; Kosciw et al., 2014; Taylor & Peter, 2011). These findings highlight the significant mental health challenges and social adversities that LGBT youth endure simply for being themselves (Asakura 2016).

Counter Narratives: Social Media as Means to Amplify Queer Narratives

Counter-narratives aim to repair the damage caused by dominant oppressive narratives (Laceulle & Baars, 2014). They provide alternative stories that allow individuals to uncover meaningful aspects of their lives that had been previously hidden or denied (Nelson, 2001). Counter-narratives can be defined as a form of resistance in which stigmatized groups assert agency against the dominant, oppressive norms by self-defining, creating visibility and connections, engaging in activism and fostering community (Wagaman, 2016). Social media platforms are cultural tools that allow for an abundance of stories to be shared on a global scale, bridging geographic and cultural barriers (Barsigian, et al., 2023). Marginalized voices that challenge dominant master narratives can be amplified and heard across the globe. Moreover, the vast availability of information regarding gender and sexual diversity on social media coupled with the opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals have a high impact on how young people navigate and negotiate their identities (Barsigian et al., 2023 ; McConnell et al., 2018). Thus, social media offers a unique developmental context that differs from that of earlier generations (Barsigian et al., 2023).

Evolving through Narratives: The Autobiographical Self

Master narratives serve as the means through which individuals engage within cultural contexts to comprehend their lived experiences, establish coherence in their lives, and form their autobiographical self (Santer et al., 2023).

Queer Identity Development

Identity formation begins in adolescence when individuals seek to create a cohesive sense of self by making meaning of life events and societal norms (Bates et al., 2019). Compared to the heterosexual and cis-gendered population, the process of sexual- and gender-identity is complex and requires time, mental energy and conscious navigation of the emergence and disclosure of one's identity (Bates et al., 2019). This process requires learning through questioning, observation and evaluation of personal experiences (Cass, 1979). Many queer individuals endure a significant burden during their identity development, often navigating this self-discovery alone (Fox & Ralston 2016). Especially in earlier phases of identity development, many individuals experience feelings of isolation and a lack of belonging (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Harper et al., 2016). To understand the process of queer identity development, we can explore the Cass model of Homosexual Identity Formation. Although the original model focused on sexual identity, this study applies this model to sexual and gender identity development.

The Cass Model: Shifting to a Positive LGBT Identity

This model provides a framework for explaining how individuals engage with narratives and integrate them into their own life stories. The model aligns with narrative research that suggests that we seek to make meaning of disruptive experiences. The Cass model proposes queer individuals pass through six identity stages (identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride and identity integration) in “attempts to resolve inconsistency between perceptions of the self and others” (Cass, 1979, p. 219). The model depicts a shift in self-perception from negative to positive (Craig

& McInroy, 2016). It is believed that individuals who passed through these stages adopted a positive view on themselves which involves embracing one's LGBT or queer identity. Although internalized negative beliefs and feelings of shame decrease throughout the stages, reaching identity pride and identity integration does not result in a full resolution of shame (Greene & Britton, 2012). A positive sense of LGBT identity, and growing connections within the queer community have been associated with positive mental health outcomes (Harper, et al., 2016). Positive sexual identity is associated with higher self-awareness, more connection to community, more intimacy, higher awareness of social justice and authenticity (Pereira & Silva, 2021). Extant literature has highlighted the importance of shared and affirming narratives to transform people's perceptions of their identities from shame to pride (Egner, 2019). Social media plays a key role in queer identity development by offering a space for individuals to explore and express their identities, seek validation, and connect with others during critical stages of self-discovery (Fox & Ralston, 2016). It enables selective disclosure of identity (Craig & McInroy, 2014) and provides access to supportive communities and sensitive information tailored to sexual and gender minorities (Harper et al., 2016) especially for those with limited access to support in their offline environments (Bates et al., 2019; Jia et al., 2021).

Self-Love: Identity and Authenticity as Protective Factors

In literature, love has been described as a core concept in movements against discrimination in marginalised communities (Osorio, 2016). For marginalised groups such as the queer community, practicing self-love can serve as a radical form of resistance. It challenges harmful dominant narratives and reclaims identities as deserving of love, care, and celebration, operating both at individual and collective levels (Osorio, 2016). This connects to the research findings of Brooks and colleagues (2022) that examined the experience of self-love in black same gender loving men. It was defined as the appreciation of one's true self, a sense of self-worth and pride in their identity despite challenges such as experiencing racism or homophobia (Brooks et al., 2022). The study revealed that what most participants loved about themselves was the freedom to express both, their race and gender identity together (Brooks et al., 2022). Self-love is often operationalized in various ways across research. Within the context of social media posts about self-love and alcohol and other drug abuse recovery, Ziemer (2022) found self-love to be predominantly discussed as feelings of authenticity to express one's true self.

Authenticity: The expression and freedom of identity

Pretochi and colleagues (2019) characterize authenticity as the acceptance of one's identity but also as a feeling of inner peace as a queer individual, as well as being able to openly share this identity with others (Riggle et al., 2017). Historically, drag queens or butch lesbians were visible when they broke binary gender traditions (Hutson, 2010b). By standing out, queer people risk facing harassment and criminalisation. Despite this, it has been important for those in the queer community to make themselves known. Extant research demonstrates that authenticity is displayed in several ways. Within the queer

communities, a marker of authenticity is physical appearance (Kitzie, 2021), as it is a way of announcing and managing one's desired or stigmatised identities (Hutson, 2010). Furthermore, traditional views based on hetero- and cisgender worldviews about intimacy, disregarded individuals whose relationships, desires and identities do not meet the traditional views of sexuality (Muzacz, 2021). Alternative paradigms for queer intimacy acknowledge same gender attraction, non-binary attraction, fluidity of sexual attraction, polyamory, non-monogamy, BDSM and kinks and emphasize authenticity and personal meaning making (e.g., kink as a means of promoting identity integration to see oneself as whole) (Muzacz, 2021). Lastly, authenticity is also closely intertwined with upholding one's commitment to values, beliefs and oneself as an entity (Erickson, 1995). The commitments to one's values provide individuals with upholding a cohesive sense of self and sense of purpose (Berzonsky & Papini, 2014).

The Present Study

Current research is in need for further insights into the discussions of self-love and LGBT identities online (Osorio, 2016). It is important to acknowledge the potential of social media as a coping resource for LGBT individuals to empower themselves (Jia et al., 2021). Visibility and representation of LGBT identities on social media may positively impact identity formation and can serve as a source of comfort and pride (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). For example, queer youth utilize online narratives to find community and deepen their own sense of identity (Kitzie, 2021). Additionally, the possibilities of connecting with people who share similar experiences and the possibilities of exploring and expressing one's identity without the fear of judgement or stigma known from the offline environment, internet use can foster higher self-esteem, confidence and perceived support in relation to one's identity (DeHaan et al., 2012). It is imperative that we need to research not only the queer counter-narratives, including associated risks and mental health challenges but also research the full lived experience within contexts that may foster well-being, personal growth and potential protective factors against discrimination and marginalisation (Brooks et al., 2022; Jia et al., 2021). Therefore, it is important to identify the information needs expressed by LGBT individuals online (Jia et al., 2021) to further improve the access of information for LGBT individuals (Rose & Freidman, 2012) and to contribute to the building of supportive, competent and culturally sensitive health care for sexual and gender minority groups (Jia et al., 2021).

This study intends to contribute to the growing body of research shedding light onto the voices of LGBT individuals online that might remain unheard in offline environments. It aims to explore the narratives in social media posts within the context of LGBT experiences and self-love to explore protective factors such as authenticity and positive LGBT identity. As such, it is trying to answer the question 1) what is being talked about in social media posts within the context of self-love and LGBT experiences? It is hypothesized that posts that discuss LGBT and self-love will contain 1) posts that present narratives about LGBT identity development, 2) posts written in a personal tone of voice, and 3) posts that contain authentic views on the self. With a focus on how authenticity is talked about in social

media posts, the study aims to answer the questions 2a) do social media posts that present a positive LGBT identity also mention authentic views on the self? And 2b) Will posts with a personal tone of voice also mention authenticity? It is hypothesized that posts that contain narratives about positive LGBT identity are associated with authentic perceptions of the self. Lastly, it is hypothesized that there is an association between posts that present authentic perceptions of the self and posts written in a personal tone.

Methods

Design

The present study was part of a larger research project called “Lay Beliefs about Self Love in the Context of Alcohol and Other Drug Recovery: A study of Social Media Posts” (Ziemer, 2022). Data collection from X (formerly known as Twitter) and Instagram captions took place in 2020 and captured posts from January 1st to December 31st, 2019. This cross-sectional study focused on public posts that contained #selflove in the caption. Data collection drew from both platforms, rather than relying on single-platform analyses (Ziemer, 2022), to shift away from viewing each social media platform as separate towards recognizing them as “polymedia” contexts (Santer, et al., 2023). Both, Instagram and Twitter allow users to write captions with Instagram allowing for up to 2,200 characters and Twitter allowing for up to 280 characters. In 2019, 290.5 million active users belonged to Twitter and 814.5 million to Instagram (Statista, 2022a; Statista, 2022b). Both sites tend to be used by diverse populations (e.g., different race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and age) and serve a global audience.

In Ziemer’s (2022) study, social media posts with #selflove were collected using Data Scraping (extracting 22,898 #selflove posts from Instagram using Instaloader and 543,447 #selflove posts from Twitter using the official Twitter Researcher platform). All posts were merged into one .csv file. To arrive at a final #selflove sample, exclusion criteria were applied. Posts were excluded if they were duplicate posts and non-English posts. This data cleaning resulted in a final sample of 118,114 #selflove posts for the data set. Drawing from this available #selflove dataset, the present study further extracted posts with hashtag #lgbt resulting in a total of 962 posts, which was merged into an Excel file. Posts were excluded if they 1) did not contain meaningful information in their caption, such as simply emojis or words without meanings, or illegible (n = 162) 2) they only contained hashtags that were not related to each other (n = 18) 3) were purely promotional of goods and services (n = 48), 4) non-English (n = 6) and 5) duplicates (n = 5). This data cleaning process resulted in the final sample of 723 #lgbt posts within the #selflove dataset.

Coding Procedures

The present study was conducted using mixed methods. It included a qualitative content analysis to identify specific themes on Instagram and Twitter posts regarding narratives about LGBT experiences in the context of self-love. To carry out the content analysis, a codebook was developed together with a

second researcher (Andalibi et al., 2017; Cohen et al., 2019). The codebook included deductive themes that were based on the theoretical framework of the study (e.g. the Cass model) as well as inductive themes that were discovered in the process. The iterative process of developing codes that captured the theoretical framework of the study as well as creating new codes for themes that emerged from the available data set resulted in a refined final codebook with seven categories and 26 codes in total (See Appendix for the codebook). Codes were not mutually exclusive meaning that one post could be coded with multiple codes/themes; a post was coded with a 0 to indicate that the theme was not present in the post and a 1 to indicate it was mentioned. The final codebook was developed, tested, and refined by two coders and in cooperation with a supervisor. By using deductive and inductive approaches to operationalize each variable, the codebook was specifically tailored towards the content of the 723 posts of the #selflove and #lgbt sample. To ascertain initial agreement in the coding process, the Inter-Rater-Reliability (IRR) between the two coders across a random sub-sample of 10 independently coded posts was calculated by using Cohen's Kappa. The average Interrater Reliability between the two coders reflected substantial agreement ($K= 0.6514$; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Together with a second coder, the codes were refined, pilot coding was conducted, and discrepancies were discussed. The final IRR between the two coders across 100 posts was 0.83 indicating an almost perfect agreement (McHugh, 2012; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Participants

Participants were the users of the accounts who indicated in Instagram or Twitter that their posts could be public (Ziemer, 2022). For this study public posts with the hashtags #selflove and #lgbt were used. However, during the data collection, usernames were removed to ensure anonymity of the poster and demographic information about the poster was unavailable (Ziemer, 2022). Instagram and Twitter are used across various ages and racial/ethnic backgrounds with an average age range of 18-24 on Instagram and 25 – 34 on Twitter (Statista, 2019).

Measures

Through examining the 723 social media posts that contained the hashtags #selflove and #lgbt, this study aimed to explore a) the narratives in social media posts within the context of LGBT experiences and self-love with a particular interest in the themes: LGBT identity development, authenticity and personal tone of post and b) explore a possible (quantitative) link between feelings of authenticity and positive LGBT identity and c) explore a possible (quantitative) link between feelings of authenticity and personal tone of post.

The posts were coded across seven categories. Every category contained several codes that defined specific themes that were found across the data: 1) Tone of the Post (including personal, informational, encouraging, critical), 2) Stages of Identity Development Online (including identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride and identity

integration), 3) Authenticity: Freedom of Expression of LGBT Identity Online (including authentic attitude, LGBT appearance, LGBT intimacy and pleasure and commitment to self-values), 4) Personal Growth (including self-love journey and self-esteem/confidence, 5) Queer Resilience (including social injustices and internalized resilience, 6) Connecting to Community (including seeking support, prosocial, connection through engagement and media and 7) Relationships and Other Expressions of Love (including partners, friends, family and self-oriented).

Tone of the Post

This category is defined as the way the poster conveyed the message of the post. Relevant to this study, the variable personal tone of post was used as a measure to detect posts that were holding personal value by telling stories from their past, present or outlooks on their future, disclosure such as of thoughts or feelings, as well as self-presentation (e.g., #selfie). Posts like "I'm loving my hair today, so I took a selfie" or "I've been so insecure about my body lately." were coded as 1.

Stages of LGBT Identity Development Online

This present study used Cass's model of homosexual identity development which proposes a linear progression through six stages - from identity confusion to identity integration - as a measure to comprehend the narratives of LGBT identity development in social media posts. Underlying this theory is a shift in self-perception from negative to positive (Craig & McInroy 2014). The narratives of the social media posts were categorized into six distinct codes based on the model's stages: Identity Confusion, Identity Comparison, Identity Tolerance, Identity Acceptance, Identity Pride, and Identity Integration. Posts that mentioned one of these codes were marked as 1; posts that did not mention this content were coded as 0.

The first stage, Identity Confusion, is operationalised as one's realisation about differences between societal norms and one's subjective experiences of attraction and gender identity, such as uncertainty about one's identity, perceptions of recognizing inconsistencies between individual's self-perception and societal norms (Fox & Ralston, 2016). An example of a post is: "How do I know what my gender identity is? The only person who can define your gender is YOU! By reflecting honestly, you can begin to understand what gender identity will work for you. #selflove #LGBTQ #gender #humanrights #queer #equality4all #feminism".

The second stage, Identity Comparison, is operationalized as comparing one's potential LGBT identity with one's previously held heterosexual identity and recognizing the possibility of an LGBT identity. During this stage, individuals can feel isolated due to feeling alienated from expected identity as well having a not yet developed sense of belonging to the LGBT or queer community (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Harper et al., 2016). This stage was marked by utilizing the internet to understand one's sexual orientation and gender identity and the LGBT community, as well as acknowledging differences between one's unfolding aspects of "new" identity and their heteronormative environment (Fox & Ralston, 2016).

An example of a post is: "Hey peoples of the internet's please tell me where I can find interesting things #lgbt #education #love #whatshappening".

The third stage Identity Tolerance is operationalized by posts revealing a sense of validation through relating to LGBT discourses. The stage was marked by information seeking behaviours and an increased understanding of what it means to identify as LGBT (Harper et al., 2016). An example of a post is: "It wasn't until I took theater and improv in the late 90s that I knew men could love men and that was okay. I also knew then I could love anyone, I felt love for. That was an important time. #lgbtq #awareness #selflove #selfawarness #identity #safespace".

The fourth stage of identity acceptance is considered a key milestone within Cass' model as it involves the resolving of such internal conflicts (Camp et al., 2020). Identity Acceptance is operationalized as the start of accepting one's LGBT identity and finding comfort within the LGBT community such as experiencing stronger sense of connection, support and guidance from the LGBT community (Harper et al., 2016). An example of a post is: "the only choice I made was to be myself".

The fifth stage Identity Pride is operationalized as disclosure of one's LGBT identity online (anonymously or selectively). Social media offers new ways of controlling how to disclose one's identity by offering privacy settings, controlling access to whom can access one's profile, or using pseudonyms. "Selective Disclosure" describes choosing when and where to reveal one's queer identity, such as coming out on social media before or instead of offline environments (Craig & McInroy, 2014). The stage is also operationalised as feelings of pride about belonging to the LGBT community and active participation in the online discourse of LGBT experiences (e.g., sharing empowering messages or advice) (Craig & McInroy, 2014). An example of a post is: "Be proud of who you are, and not ashamed of how someone else sees you... #selflove #selfworth #selfrespect #loveyourself #beyourself #beproud #outandproud #lgbtq #bisexual".

The final stage Identity Integration is operationalized by one's embrace and integration of LGBT identity in all aspects of life (e.g., in offline environment such as workplace or family). Within the social media environment, individuals might engage actively in critical discussions, giving advice and support to others and engaging in critical dialogues with others who might reject the identities of those belonging to the LGBT or queer communities (Harper et al., 2016). An example of a post is: "Some of the guys still ostracize me in my unit cuz I'm openly gay, but it's ok cuz I still ball on them in sports. How's that for some irony #lgbt #staytrue #beyourself #SelfLove".

The measure for Positive LGBT Identity was conceptualized as holding a positive view of one's LGBT or queer identity while passing the stages of identity pride and integration. Individuals who pass through these stages adopted a positive view on themselves which involves embracing one's LGBT or queer identity. A summed variable containing posts that were coded as 1 for either Identity Integration (n = 258) or Identity Pride (n = 395) represented the measure for Positive LGBT identity (n = 516).

Authenticity

Authenticity was defined as the feeling and practice of being true to oneself and others (Vannini & Franzese, 2008) and as the freedom to express one's LGBT identity. This study aimed to measure Authenticity by creating four codes that were found to play central roles in feelings of authenticity in LGBT individuals (authentic attitude, LGBT appearance, LGBT intimacy and pleasure and commitment to self-values). Posts that mentioned one of these codes were marked as 1; posts that did not mention this content were coded as 0.

“Authentic Attitude” was conceptualized as a perceived sense of liberation from judgement when embracing one's LGBT identity. An example of a post is: “the only choice I made was to be myself”. “LGBT Appearance” aimed to address the significance of clothing and physical appearance in the construction of and communication of LGBT identities. This code explored how the poster presents themselves as a presentation of their LGBT identity. An example of a post is: “so after 21 years on this planet I can finally say that I found myself in a mind frame where I can wholeheartedly say that I love the way I look, and I don't care what anyone else has to say about it”. “LGBT Intimacy and Pleasure” aimed to address the multifaceted experiences of pleasure and intimacy (e.g., kinks, masturbation or polyamory). The theme included posts that talked about being attracted to people of various genders, fluidity of attraction over one's lifespan, alternative structures of romantic and sexual relationships as opposed to monogamy (e.g., polyamory, and ethical non-monogamy), fetishes, kinks and BDSM and aromantic or asexual relationships. An example of a post is: “I contributed to [username anonymized] article to help people on the journey toward experiencing sexual pleasure. Everyone has urges for sexual satisfaction. #sextherapyhawaii #sextherapist #noshame #lgbtqia #mindfulsex #selflove #partners #solosex #selfpleasure #masturbation”. “Commitment to Self-Values” aimed to address feelings of authenticity by committing to one's own core beliefs and values. This is based on the notion that feelings of (in)-authenticity are based on one's own commitments to self-values and beliefs as well as their societal roles (Erickson, 1995). This included feelings of being true to oneself by standing up for or living by one's own values and morals (e.g., showing support or solidarity for people with HIV). Posts like “Hey there! We are two teenage activists looking to make the world a better place! If you are passionate about issues such as #LGBTQ, #MentalHealthAwareness, #ClimateCrisis, #BlackLivesMatter, #GunControl, #SelfLove and MORE go follow us on Instagram!” or “We have the right to be free, to just be. Come to POP INN and leave with a pill this International Human Rights Day. #hivprevention #hivtesting #HIV #humanrightsday #internationalhumanrightsday #msm #bimen #gaymen #transmen #transwomen #lgbtqi #knowyourstatus #safesex #selflove” were coded as 1.

A summed variable containing posts that were coded as “1” for either Authentic Attitude (n = 159), LGBT Appearance (n = 153), LGBT intimacy and pleasure (n = 53) or Commitment to Self-Values (n = 83) constituted the measure for Authenticity (n = 361).

Additional Measures

The final codebook itself contained additional categories that explored present themes in the data extending beyond the quantitative framework of this study yet were considered when analyzing themes found in the posts. The category Tone of the Post included, in addition to personal tone of post, informational, encouraging and critical tone of the post. Informational tone of the post was conceptualized as the sharing of resources, raising awareness, and promotional tones, and informative content specifically about LGBT experiences. Encouraging tone of the post was conceptualised as motivational, encouraging messages and calls for celebration. Critical tone of the post conceptualised as engaging in a critical discourse about LGBT experiences in offline and online environments.

The category Personal Growth explored the process and manifestation of change and growth in LGBT individuals. The code self-love journey addressed the self-reflective process of self-discovery, taking action and taking responsibility for one's own needs. The code confidence/self-esteem aimed to address one's own appraisals of competencies and capabilities. This included positive self-evaluation, self-appreciation and confidence in one's capabilities.

The category queer resilience was defined as becoming stronger by overcoming adversities and included the two codes: social injustice and internalized resilience. While social injustice was conceptualized as coping with hardships centered around homophobia, discrimination or hate speech, internalized resilience was conceptualized as coping with mental health concerns (e.g., shame, loneliness) potentially, but not exclusively connected to their own LGBT experiences in life.

The category Connecting with Community aimed to address how users connected with others through their posts. The code seeking support was conceptualized as utilizing the internet to reach out for support, advice or help concerning doubts or difficulties about one's LGBT experiences. The code prosocial was conceptualized as utilizing the internet to demonstrate self-transcendent emotions such as compassion, awe, or gratitude in form of posts that include offering support, or comforting remarks, sharing advice or contributing to a sense of community (Stellar et al., 2017). The code connection through engagement aimed to address the act of inviting others to engage (offline or online) to create or foster connection and a sense of community, such as sharing events, support groups or products. The code Media included posts that involved mentioning celebrities, writers, idols or role models, lyrics, movies or poetry in their posts.

The category Relationships and other Expressions of Love aimed to conceptualize to whom and how the poster expressed their love. This category was split into four codes. The first code being Partners (talking about a romantic relationship, or dating, as well as longing for a relationship), the second code being friends (talking about friends, or friends from the past, spending time with friends or experiences related to friendship), and the third code being family (mentioning of family relations and dynamics, or activities that poster shared with family members), and the fourth code being self-oriented love which

included expressing ways of self-care such as engaging in yoga, doing manicure, relaxation or hobbies. It also included setting boundaries to protect and stand up for oneself and showing kindness and self-compassion towards oneself.

Ethics

This study was exempt by UC Berkeley's IRB and followed the NIH guidelines and UC Berkeley's protocols. The study was approved by the University of Amsterdam's Ethics Review Board as it was in collaboration with UvA. The exempt was granted due to the use of publicly available social media posts, refraining from private posts and accounts. To protect privacy, usernames were removed, posts were paraphrased to assure anonymity, and data were aggregated for counts and topics to prevent identification (Ziemer, 2022).

Analyses

Qualitative and Quantitative Analyses were conducted using the programme IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27).

Qualitative Analysis

To answer the Research Question "what are the main themes discussed in LGBT and self-love posts?", first, a descriptive analysis of all themes in the codebook was conducted. This way frequencies of all 26 themes of the codebook were calculated. Additionally, to test the Hypothesis (H1) that posts that discuss LGBT and self-love will contain 1) posts that present narratives about LGBT identity development, 2) posts written in a personal tone of voice and 3) posts that contain authentic views on the self, the frequencies of these variable were looked at specifically: Personal Tone of Post, Identity Confusion, Identity Comparison, Identity Tolerance, Identity Acceptance, Identity Pride, Identity Integration, Authentic Attitude, LGBT Appearance, LGBT Intimacy and Pleasure and Commitment to Self-Values. Second, categories and codes were qualitatively reviewed to delineate how posters mentioned the main themes.

Quantitative Analysis

The study also included a quantitative Chi-square analysis to investigate the association between posts that contain authentic views of the self and posts that 1) mention positive LGBT identity and 2) contain a personal tone of the post.

Two chi-square tests were performed: a) to test the Hypothesis (H2a) that posts that contain narratives about positive LGBT identity development are associated with authentic views on the self and b) to test the Hypothesis (H2b) that there is an association between authenticity and personal tone of the post. For the first hypothesis, the summed variable Authenticity and the summed variable Positive LGBT identity were used. For the second hypothesis, the summed variable Authenticity and the variable Personal Tone of Post were used. The assumptions to perform a Chi Square test were met as the variables were dichotomous and each post was independent as they came from different profiles and different platforms.

Each variable had sufficient posts in their category and the sample size was sufficient (McHugh, 2012). The Phi Coefficient was used to assess the strength of the association ($\alpha = 0.05$ and $p < 0.05$).

Results

Themes (Content Analysis)

A descriptive analysis was conducted to determine the frequencies of all 26 themes outlined in the developed codebook across all social media posts that contained #selflove and #lgbt ($n = 723$). Table 1 displays the frequencies of all 26 codes, following the structure of the codebook. Figure 1 visualizes the percentage of all the codes that were present across all posts. It is visible that the top 10 themes of 26 across this sample were: Personal Tone of Post (55.7 %), Identity Pride (54.6 %), Identity Integration (35.7 %), Prosocial (34.0 %), Encouraging (30.6 %), Confidence/Self-Esteem (27.0 %), Self-Oriented (23.7 %), Authentic Attitude (22.0 %), LGBT Appearance (APP = 21.2 %), and Informational (19.9 %).

Personal Tone of the Post

In line with the first hypothesis, this study was interested in the occurrence of these three themes in the posts: personal tone of the post, LGBT identity development, and authenticity. First, this research was particularly interested in the frequencies of the code “Personal”, which belongs to the Category “Tone of Post”. Results reveal that 403 posts out of the total amount of 723 posts were written in a personal tone, as compared to posts written in an informational, encouraging or critical tone. This reflects that more than half of the posts were used to disclose personal experiences, thoughts or feelings. As an example, one user disclosed in a post: “Decided to go a bit more pretty than usual yesterday. Thankfully my hair cooperated! I’ll be going to a queer gathering tomorrow! #nonbinary #intersex #LGBTQ #selflove #photography #furry #love #me #pagan #glasses #necklace”. Another user shared: “I’m definitely feeling myself. The more this year progresses, the more AMAZING I feel. #myyear #rainbowhair #rainbow #queer #nonbinary #androgynous #tattoos #selfie #lgbtq #selflove”.

LGBT Identity Development

Second, the study also examined the category capturing the six stages of LGBT identity development online. The frequency table revealed that identity confusion and identity comparison were the least frequent, with less than 1% of the posts discussing the initial two stages of LGBT identity development online. The codes for identity tolerance and identity acceptance were present in 2% and 3.6% of the posts, respectively. The final stages, identity pride and identity integration showed that more than half of all posts addressed identity pride (55.7%), followed by identity integration (35.7 %). The summed variable Positive LGBT Identity, which includes identity pride and identity integration, were found in 516 out of 723 posts (71.4%). In the positive LGBT identity posts, posts included mentions of feelings of pride, or engagement with the queer community online as well as offline. An example of a post that captured this theme is: “[@anonymized account] has been wonderful. Thank you for the space to connect with others who are POC and share experiences, laughter and joy [@anonymized account] #lgbt #pride

#transrightsarehumanrights #goodmentalhealth #makup #selfies #shopping #photography #positivevibes #selflove”. Thus, while the hypothesis was not fully founded that identity development would be primarily discussed in the posts, identity pride and integration (compared to the other 4 stages of identity development) were some of the most discussed themes in the posts.

Authenticity

Third, this study aimed to explore how authenticity was talked about in the sample of social media posts containing #selflove and #lgbt. The summed variable authenticity was created to summarize all posts that were coded for authentic attitude, LGBT appearance, LGBT intimacy and pleasure or commitment to self-values. In line with the hypothesis, almost half of all social media posts discussed authenticity (49.9%) with authentic attitude (22.0%) and LGBT appearance (21.2%) being the most prevalent. Some examples of posts found in authenticity follow.

A post indicative for authentic attitude is: “Do you, someone’s going to feel it!”. A post about LGBT appearance in this sample is: “My beautiful sister! So proud of her standing her ground and wearing a suit instead of a dress! She was told she would dishonour the family, that she would be judged! And she said she would be judged either way and might as well be comfortable #LGBT #selflove”. An example of a post that discussed the freedom to explore and express intimacy and pleasure is “Kink is how I shorthand the dynamics between partners when we are playing with headspace or pain. #BDSM #leather #lgbtqcle #bodypositivity #selfacceptance #self #selflove #bornthisway #kink”. While some posts revealed personal experiences or thoughts about their own sexuality, some were written in an informational tone of post to provide definitions “Fetish is a form of sexual desire in which gratification is linked to an abnormal degree to a particular object, item of clothing, etc #fetish #BDSM #leather #masturbation #selflove #self #sexpositive #LGBTQCLE #lgbtq #bornthisway” or provide resources “This weeks blog is up! In it we discuss shame, AIDS and sexual assault and living a life in freedom. #LGBTQ #blog #AIDS #Religions #selfhelp #selflove #lifestyleblogger #TransIsBeautiful #Personal Growth #Truth #selfcare” or to promote products “Our Vorenax #dildo is a great starter toy for those looking for more experience in #selflove. Find him on our #etsyshop! Link in bio #repost #fantasy #alien #furry #gayup #gayboy #gay #erotic #sexy #bdsm #cosplay #etsy #nsfw #lgbtq #instagram #instagood #saturday #weekend”). Another post indicative for commitment to self-values was “It’s time to retire the term ‘pro-life’. It’s not adequate to describe the hate. #prochoice #feminist #feminism #equality #blm #prolife #abortion #womensrights #equalrights #liberal #selflove #activism #mybodymychoice #republican #lovelislove #news #maga”.

Table 1

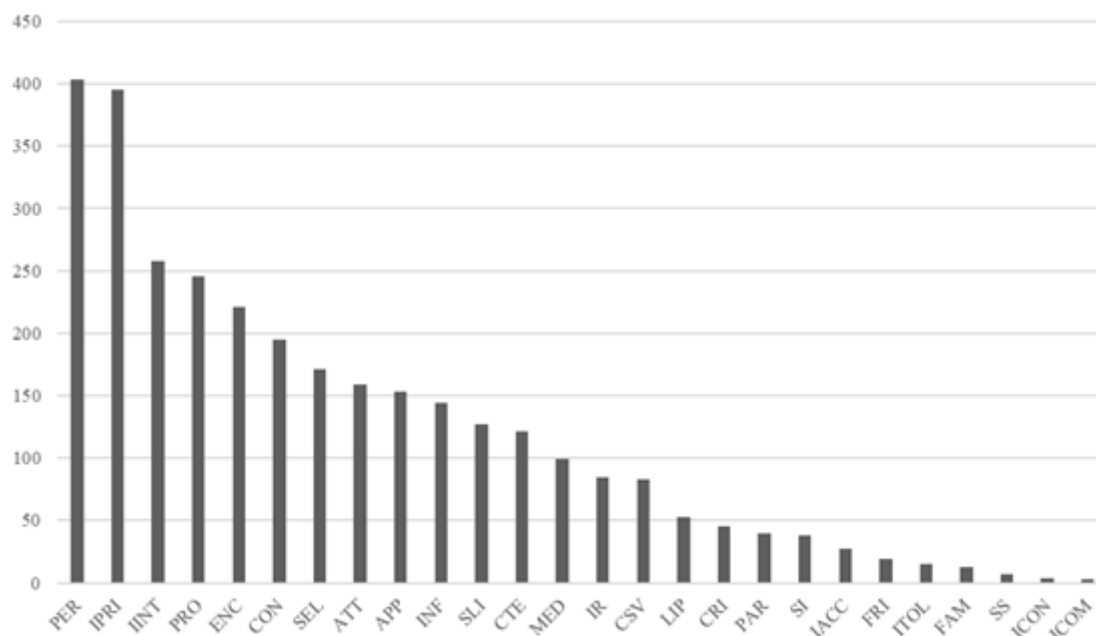
Frequencies and Percentages of all 26 variables across the #lgbt and #selflove Dataset

Themes discussed in #LGBT and #selflove	n	%
Category 1: Tone of the Post		

Personal Tone	403	55,7
Informational	144	19,9
Encouraging	221	30,6
Critical	45	6,2
Category 2: Stages of LGBT Identity Development Online		
Identity Confusion	4	0,6
Identity Comparison	3	0,4
Identity Tolerance	15	2,1
Identity Acceptance	27	3,7
Identity Pride	395	54,6
Identity Integration	258	35,7
Category 3: Authenticity: Freedom of Expression of LGBT Identity		
Authentic Attitude	159	22,0
LGBT Appearance	153	21,2
LGBT Intimacy and Pleasure	53	7,3
Commitment to Self-Values	83	11,5
Category 4: Personal Growth		
Self-Love Journey	127	17,6
Confidence/Self-Esteem	195	27,0
Category 5: Queer Resilience		
Social Injustice	38	5,3
Internalised Resilience	85	11,8
Category 6: Connecting with Community		
Social Support	7	1,0
Prosocial	246	34,0
Connecting Through Engagement	121	16,7
Media	99	13,7
Category 7: Relationships and Other Expressions of Love		
Partners	40	5,5
Friends	19	2,6
Family	13	1,8
Self-Oriented	171	23,7
Total	723	100

Figure 1

Distribution of Percentage of all 26 variables across the #lgbt and #selflove Dataset



Note: PER = Personal Tone of Post, IPRI = Identity Pride, IINT = Identity Integration, PRO = Prosocial, ENC = Encouraging, CON = Confidence, SEL = Self-oriented, ATT = Authentic Attitude, APP = LGBT Appearance, INF = Informational, SLJ = Self-Love-Journey, CTE = Connecting Through Engagement, MED = Media, IR = Internalised Resilience, CSV = Commitment to Self-Values, CRI = Critical, PAR = Partners, SI = Social Injustices, IACC = Identity Acceptance, FRI = Friends, ITOL = Identity Tolerance, FAM = Family, SS = Social Support, ICON = Identity Confusion, ICOM = Identity Comparison

Quantitative Analysis

Two Chi-square analyses were performed to assess associations amongst various themes.

Association between positive LGBT identity and feelings of authenticity

To test Hypothesis 2a that posts that contain narratives about positive LGBT identity are associated with authentic views on the self, a Chi-square analysis was performed with the summed variable positive LGBT identity and the summed variable authenticity. The chi-square test for independence (with Yates' Continuity Correction) indicated a significant association between positive LGBT identity and authenticity [$X^2(1, 723) = 31.036, p < 0.001, \Phi = 0.21$]. Therefore, the hypothesis (H2a) that posts that contain narratives about positive LGBT identity development are associated with authentic views on the self can be accepted. However, the effect size as indicated by the phi coefficient ($\phi = 0.21$) reveals a small to medium effect size (Pallant, 2016).

Table 2.1 shows that positive LGBT identity was mentioned in 516 posts (71.4%) out of all 723 posts whereas 207 posts (28.6%) did not mention positive LGBT identity. Authenticity was mentioned in 361 posts (49.93%) out of all 723 posts whereas 362 posts (50.06%) did not mention authenticity. Out of

all 516 posts discussing a positive LGBT identity, 292 (56.6%) posts also mentioned authenticity. Similarly, out of all 361 posts discussing authenticity, 292 (80.9%) posts mentioned positive LGBT identity. Furthermore, out of all 516 posts that talked about positive LGBT identity, 224 posts showed no mentioning of authenticity. This means 43.41% of all posts discussing a positive LGBT identity did not talk about authenticity compared to 56.6% that did talk about authenticity. Posts indicative of the presented proportions are presented in table 2.2.

Table 2.1

Crosstabulation Positive LGBT identity and Authenticity

		Authenticity		Total
		Not mentioned	Mentioned	
Positive LGBT Identity	Not Mentioned	138	69	207
	Mentioned	224	292	516
Total		362	361	723

Note: Pearson Chi-Square with Yates Correction = 31.036, df = 1, p<0.001

Table 2.2

Posts Indicative of Proportions of Chi-Square Analysis

		Authenticity	
		Mentioned	Not mentioned
Positive LGBT Identity	Mentioned	Yes, that is me in heels and not giving no type of way about it! [...] I am a gay male and if you don't like it then leave! [...] #gay #loveislove #blacklivesmatter #translivesmatter #lgbt #selflove	[@anonymized account] has been wonderful. Thank you for the space to connect with others who are POC and share experiences, laughter and joy [@anonymized account] #lgbt #pride #transrightsarehumanrights #goodmentalhealth #makup #selfies #shopping #photography #positivevibes #selflove
	Not Mentioned	Shout out to Lizzo and Sam Smith. You are everything I want	I just need one episode of QueerEye that doesn't include a

my children to see and be. Free. French tuck. Love the show
 My heart feels so happy seeing though... They doing the lords
 you thrive in your unapologetic work. #LGBTQ #QueerEye
 honesty. #LGBTQts #selflove
 #plussizebeauty #BeFree
 #beyourself #selflove

Association between personal tone of post and feelings of authenticity

To test Hypothesis 2b that there is an association between posts that present authentic perceptions of the self and posts written in a personal tone, a Chi-square analysis was performed with the variable personal tone of post and the summed variable authenticity. A Chi-square test for independence (with Yates' Continuity Correction) indicated no significant association between personal tone and the summed variable authenticity [$X^2(1, 723) = 2.369, p=0.124, \Phi = 0.060$].

Table 3.1 shows that in all 723 posts, 212 (29.3%) posts contained both, a personal tone of post and mentions of authenticity. Out of all posts written in a personal tone of post ($n = 403$), 212 (52.6%) also mentioned authenticity. Similarly, out of all 361 posts that mentioned authenticity, 212 (58.72%) were written in a personal tone of post. Even though the proportions of posts that contained both, personal tone and feelings of authenticity were higher, the Chi-square analysis did not yield statistically significant results. Therefore, the hypothesis (H2b) that there is an association between posts written in a personal tone of post and feelings of authenticity cannot be accepted and cannot be generalised outside of this sample. Posts indicative of the presented proportions are presented in table 3.2.

Table 3.1

Crosstabulation Personal Tone of Post and Authenticity

		Authenticity		Total
		Not mentioned	Mentioned	
Personal Tone of Post	Not Mentioned	171	149	320
	Mentioned	191	212	403
Total		362	361	723

Note: Pearson Chi-Square with Yates Correction = 2.369, $df = 1, p = 0.124$

Table 3.2

Posts Indicative of Proportions of Chi-Square Analysis

	Authenticity	
	Mentioned	Not Mentioned

Personal Tone of Post	Mentioned	Disclaimer, this is a hard post for me to do. I make no apologies for it, as it is a means of self-acceptance and growth. #bornthisway #selflove #selfacceptance #selfrespect #self #LGBTQCLE #bodyselfsex #sexpositive #bodypositivity	Feeling cute, might pull up on you... idk #SaturdayThoughts #gay #LGBT #selflove
	Not Mentioned	Be proud of who you are, and not ashamed of how someone else sees you... #selflove #selfworth #selfrespect #loveyourself #beyourself #beproud #outandproud #lgbtq #bisexual	Happy pride month #PrideMonth #LGBTQ #selflove

Discussion

Given the profound mental health challenges arising from discrimination and marginalisation, social media offers LGBT individuals to connect with similar peers, fostering community support and allowing them to disclose, express and explore their identities in a controlled online environment (DeHaan et al., 2012). Therefore, the study aimed to provide insights into LGBT experiences by examining social media posts that disclose personal stories, address identity development and authenticity online in the context of self-love. Results of the content analysis revealed that the top five themes out of 26 themes discussed within #lgbt and #selflove posts were: 1) posts disclosing a personal story, 2) posts talking about identity pride and 3) identity integration, 4) posts written in a prosocial and 5) encouraging manner. Posts mentioning positive LGBT identity compromised 71.4 % of the sample. A significant association was found between positive LGBT identity and authenticity, however with a small effect size. No significant association was observed between posts written in a personal tone of post and posts indicating authenticity.

In line with the hypothesis that LGBT identity development would be discussed in the posts, there was a clear majority of posts presenting the last two stages of the Cass Model: identity pride (54.6%) and identity integration (35.7%). When aggregated into Positive LGBT Identity, 71.4% unique posts reflected this theme. In contrast, the other four stages of the model (identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance and identity acceptance) appeared in less than 4% of the posts. The results are in line with previous research conducted by Fox and Ralston (2016) that showed that individuals who were more

comfortable in their identity engaged more in sharing LGBT related content, engaging in online discussions trying to educate others such as guiding LGBT individuals who were exploring their identities as well as educating non-LGBT individuals. Prior research suggests that social media may be a space for individuals to disclose their identity in a controlled manner before or instead of coming out in the offline environment (Craig & McInroy, 2014). Our data shows that many users did address their sexual or gender identity in their social media posts.

Confirming our hypothesis, more than half of all posts were written in a personal tone of post. This aligns with previous literature describing social media as a place to share personal stories since people are motivated to express aspects of themselves (Bargh et al., 2002) with the hope of being accepted and acknowledged by others. Additionally, encouraging tone of posts and informational tones of post were prevalent across the sample as opposed to critical tone of post which was only present in 6.2% of all posts. Research by Mwangi and colleagues (2018) on the “I Too, Am” campaign which focused on Black college students’ experiences with racism, found social media served as a means for sharing common experiences, exchanging information and supportive messages that fostered a collective identity. Social Media platforms functioned as a counterspace in response to discriminatory environments and the lack of safe spaces in the offline world, allowing users to share and maintain narratives, engage in active resistance, healing collectively and to build relationships. In the current study, posts addressing positive LGBT identity, personal stories, encouraging and informational messages could be interpreted as engaging in collective healing and identity formation, community support, and resisting harmful narratives. In fact, supportive relationships, and empowering communities may be particularly important for LGBT individuals (Mohapatra & Hemmige, 2024).

Results show that one half of all posts mentioned authenticity. This finding is in line with extant research such as the study of Bailey and colleagues (2020) who analysed 10,560 Facebook posts and found that life satisfaction was higher in users that engaged in authentic self-expression. Compared to other social media platforms, platforms like Facebook and Instagram are often seen as more realistic, where users aim to present more authentic versions of themselves (Bailey et al., 2020). When examining the posts mentioning authenticity in this study, a substantial number of posts were found to address authentic attitudes and authenticity about physical appearance. The relatively high number of posts about authenticity related to appearance could also be accounted for the visual nature of Instagram, where captions can be accompanied by visual representations such as selfies. While the study’s expectations were met, with half of the posts addressing authenticity, it is noteworthy that the other half did not mention it at all. Posts which addressed authenticity connected to intimacy and pleasure and self-values or beliefs were less present in the current study. Literature about authenticity on social media emphasizes that self-representation on these platforms can be seen as a type of dialogue with the online audience, which provides feedback. Expressing one’s true self to this audience means putting oneself in a vulnerable

position for potential criticism (Taylor, 2022). The insight of the present study that authenticity was not mentioned in the other half of the total sample could be an indicator of such vulnerable positions. Perhaps, on Instagram and Twitter, conversations about intimacy and pleasure, as well as values and beliefs could be seen as more vulnerable than expressions of authentic attitudes and appearances.

In line with our hypothesis, our study shows a significant association between positive LGBT identity and authenticity. Prior research reflects this suggesting that being true to oneself is a key component of a positive LGBT identity (Riggle et al., 2017). Our findings are supported by extant research that positive LGBT identity is associated with higher authenticity, self-awareness and more connection to the community (Pereira & Silvia, 2021). The significant association highlights that these platforms may offer a space for individuals to discuss and express aspects of their LGBT identities. This sheds light onto the possibility that the internet allows individuals to explore their sexual and gender identities, as well as to express them without worrying about disapproval from real-life peers and family members (Bargh et al., 2002; DeHaan et al., 2012). Egner (2020) described narratives about pride as powerful self-love narratives serving as positive affirmations to turn shame into embracing and adopting a positive identity. Scholars have highlighted the importance of these narratives across marginalised communities (e.g., LGBT individuals) as means to support and empower their members despite hardships and discrimination to embrace their authentic selves (Bradford & Clark, 2011).

Although the association between positive LGBT identity and authenticity was significant, the effect size was small. While authenticity and positive LGBT identity both relate to embracing one's true self and showed a significant overlap in this study, it is crucial to emphasize they are separate entities with conceptual differences. In the current study, authenticity is defined as a sense of freedom of expressing one's identity and living according to one's values and beliefs (Riggle et al., 2017). It reflects an intrapersonal assessment of whether one is being true to oneself which influences decisions about disclosing or concealing identity. The overall understanding of identity development in this study is based on a framework that identity is a social construct that individuals build through meaning-making processes (Kuper & Mustanki, 2014). Positive LGBT identity is understood as having a positive view of one's LGBT or queer identity. Identity is shaped by interactions with others and should not be viewed as something one can possess or lack (Marine-Roig, 2015). Literature about authenticity claimed that one can miss authenticity when they need to act in ways that they do not identify as (Feldman & Hazlett 2013). Research argues that individuals may choose to conceal their LGBT identities in situations that could pose psychological or physical threat yet still feel authentic (Petrocchi et al., 2019). Conversely, someone might disclose their LGBT identity but not feel authentic if the identity label does not align with their true sense of self (Petrocchi et al., 2019).

Surprising, and contrary to our hypothesis, was that no significant association was found between posts written in a personal tone of post and posts indicating feelings of authenticity. Perhaps this is

because disclosure on social media may vary in depth (Utz, 2015). While it enables personal, intimate storytelling, there is also a strong tendency for positive and entertaining stories (Utz, 2015). Research on personal storytelling on social media emphasizes that online platforms can facilitate self-expression (Santer et al., 2023). However, it needs to be acknowledged that also within online platforms, it cannot be assumed that queer individuals will not be objected to bullying or negative reactions (Varjas et al., 2013). Given the knowledge that LGBT and queer individuals are at risk for experiencing discrimination and violence in various settings in their life (Morris, 2021), barriers restricting the sharing of personal stories without fear of judgement are also existent in online environments. There is evidence that personal narratives, such as coming-out stories and same-sex relationships, often receive heightened attention as sexual desires because of their perceived deviance to societal norms (DeRidder & Bauwel, 2015). Our results could yield supporting evidence for this fact, as posts about intimacy and pleasure, as well as posts about self-values and beliefs were only present in 7.3% and 11.5% of posts. DeRidder and Bauwel (2015) point out an important aspect of hidden efforts that often go unseen when it comes to sharing of such personal stories. That is, sharing of personal stories is a self-reflexive process which involves reworking of categories like heterosexual intimacy, masculinity and femininity. This could explain the pattern of results of authenticity across our sample. Even though personal tone of post and authenticity were not significantly associated, the presence of posts like (“Disclaimer, this is a hard post for me to do. I make no apologies for it, as it is a means of self-acceptance and growth.”) hold value because they can make queerness feel genuine and valid by sharing stories that present LGBT and queer people in ways that seem real and relatable (Gray, 2009). By sharing personal stories and posts indicating authenticity related to their queer reality, people contribute to the cultural online environment and foster queer visibility and representation.

Strengths and Limitations

The current study is not without limitations. Several methodological limitations in this study should be considered. First, demographics such as race, income/employment status, age and education are missing which could have provided important context for understanding the posts. Additionally, the sample was reduced to posts that contained #lgbt and #selflove. The use of the #lgbt label in the study may have excluded individuals who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender but did not use the #lgbt hashtag. Therefore, the study does not capture all LGBT and queer individuals and does not capture the whole range of online engagement (e.g., different social media site, google searches or chats) (Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2024). Additionally, this study focused on the LGBT community as a one community without considering diversity and differences of lived experiences within the community (Lewis & Reynolds, 2021). Intersections such as race or religion were not explored (Talbot et al., 2022). Therefore, our findings cannot simply be generalized but rather should be seen as contributing to highlighting and giving voice to LGBT individuals that might not be heard in the offline environment. The study reinforces a

narrative rooted in heteronormative assumptions by hypothesizing that a positive LGBT identity is linked to authenticity. It assumes that coming-out and disclosing one's LGBT identity, and actively engaging with others is a necessary step to achieve a positive view on one's identity as well as authenticity. It pushes the rigid expectation that queer individuals must come out (Hackford-Peer, 2010) and it demands from these individuals to be 'honest' (DeRidder & Bauwel, 2015). The Cass model which follows a linear structure from negative to positive perception of identity holds various thinking traps such as forgetting about fluidity in sexual and gender identity and forgetting the emotional labor that individuals might have gone through or still endure even in stages that are reflecting identity pride and integration (DeRidder & Bauwel). By coding identity development into six categories based on Cass' model of LGBT identity development, the complexity of queer identity such as intersectionality and diversity within LGBT communities may surpass the straightforward linear approach of the model (Brooks et al., 2022). Future research may want to consider using a framework that includes intersectionality. The study also lacks consideration of the broader context, such as visual images or the users' profile information, which could enrich the understanding of the posts. Moreover, the data reflects only a snapshot of the content shared and does not capture the complexity of the individuals behind the posts such as actual feelings or thoughts of the user (DeRidder & Bauwel, 2015). Positivity bias in social media posts may skew the representation of experiences (Andalibi et al., 2017). Conducting interviews about social media engagement and motivations could offer deeper insights.

Even with the limitations the present study contributes to a growing body of research that highlights the voices of LGBT and queer individuals and there are several strengths to this study. By performing a qualitative content analysis, we were able to systematically and objectively describe and quantify the complexities of identity and authenticity by creating categories and conceptual models (Elo et al., 2014). Additionally, the large sample size of the study enabled us to gather a variety of posts within the context of #selflove and #lgbt. Even though the sampling and coding process was presented in a detailed manner, some aspects depend on the researcher's interpretation and intuition (Elo et al., 2014). The Inter-Rater Reliability reflects the interpretative differences between the two coders. Additionally, there is a chance that categories of the codebook were overlapping (Kygäs et al., 2011). Our content analysis offers several advantages over traditional survey assessments in LGBT research. Unlike surveys, which often limit respondents to predefined identity labels, our analysis of public social media posts captures a wider range of self-definitions and expressions (Waite & Denier, 2019). This ensures that individuals who do not identify with conventional labels are still represented in the data (Waite & Denier, 2019). Additionally, we could avoid challenges such as nonresponse, refusal to answer or other forms of missing data (Waite & Denier, 2019). Furthermore, our analysis benefits from the broad range of social media content, allowing for a more diverse and nuanced exploration of our primary contexts (Elo et al., 2014).

Implications and Directions for Future Research: “Tell Me Your Story”

“There’s magic in being seen by people who understand – it gives you permission to keep going. Self-expression sometimes requires other people. Becoming ourselves is a collective journey.” (Vaid-Menon, 2020, p. 25).

The study highlights the importance of social media as a space for support where individuals can express their identities, build community and foster self-love. It shows that social media platforms hold space for individuals to express and celebrate their LGBT identities and engage in authentic self-expression. Our study emphasizes the importance of being mindful of own biases, stereotypes and valuing unique and diverse experiences of LGBT and queer individuals (Lewis & Reynolds, 2021). We urge research to include theories and frameworks such as queer theory and intersectionality to gain a more nuanced understanding of LGBT experiences (Van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2017). In interaction with queer individuals, we encourage mental health care providers to prioritize authenticity, self-awareness and participant-led dialogue. It is crucial to foster genuine interaction and trust in the relationship. Mutual self-disclosure is found to enhance rapport and can reduce cultural mistrust. Allowing these individuals to take the lead in conversations about their experiences can foster honest expression (Gorritz et al., 2023). We recommend that both, research and therapeutic settings prioritise supporting LGBT and queer individuals in cultivating self-love to affirm and embrace their identities.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research that investigates how self-love and LGBT identities are discussed online. It acknowledges the significant potential of social media as a coping resource, enabling LGBT individuals to empower themselves and foster community support to cultivate self-love. The findings show that social media serves as a space for LGBT individuals to explore, express, and celebrate their identities while navigating a controlled environment that may offer support. Future research should delve into intersectional frameworks and diverse lived experiences within the LGBT community to gain a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics. Moreover, investigating the impact of different social media platforms and the role of visual content in identity expression could provide further insights. Nonetheless, it reminds researchers to investigate existing barriers for the LGBT and queer community that exist on these platforms too. We recommend that future studies incorporate qualitative methods such as interviews to capture the nuances of personal experiences and motivations behind social media engagement. This approach could enhance our understanding of how social media is utilized by LGBT and queer individuals in their journey toward self-love, positive LGBT identity, and expression of their identities.

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Appendix
Final Codebook #selflove #lgbt

	Code Abbreviation	Code	Description/ Example
Category	1		Tone of the Post (How is poster conveying the message? Different than Positive/Negative Emotions Category) - Selecting more than one is OK
	PER	Personal	Disclosures: Poster shares personal experiences, feelings, and thoughts This also includes posts with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • #selfie (this implies poster is sharing their face, parts of them visually) Example: <i>"I'm loving my hair today, so I took a selfie"</i> Example: <i>"I've been so insecure about my body lately."</i>
	INF	Informational	Sharing of resources, about LGBT experiences This also includes posts with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • informative, raising awareness, promotional tones, and cautionary tones • Stating facts (e.g., did you know that, ...) Example: <i>"It's National Coming Out Day and as an English Teacher, it is my job to also teach love and kindness."</i>

			Example: <i>“Excellent Sexplain UK session with NCS today.”</i>
	ENC	Encouraging	Motivational quotes, encouraging messages, call for celebration Example: <i>“you woke up today and each day you get is a blessing! Appreciate today and do the most with it”</i>
	CRI	Critical	Opening critical discourse about LGBT experiences in offline and online environments. This includes also posts with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • talking about marginalization, discrimination, political issues, societal issues, challenging norms, Example: <i>“It seems like daily we are surrounded by some form of prejudice”</i>
Category	2	Stages of LGBT identity development online What themes do the narratives about LGBT identity development in the posts focus on? (MORE THAN ONE OK)	
	ICON	Identity Confusion	Posts present narratives about realizing differences between societal norms and subjective experiences of attraction and gender identity. This stage is marked by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncertainty or questioning and doubts about one’s identity

-
- Perceptions of recognizing inconsistencies between individual's self-perception and societal norms.

- Expression of feelings of not fitting in.

*Affective states like shame due to internalized homophobia, emotional ambivalence, as well as fear of stigmatization, rejection, negative judgement or discrimination can be present at this stage.

Example: *"How do I know what my gender identity is? The only person who can define your gender is YOU! By reflecting honestly, you can begin to understand what gender identity will work for you. #selflove #LGBTQ #gender #humanrights #queer #equality4all #feminism"*.

ICOM

Identity Comparison

Posts present narratives about comparison of potential LGBT identity with heterosexual identity that the poster has been holding up until now. (e.g., debating whether a woman could still plan to have children if she'd be with another woman).

The stage is marked by:

- Stating that there might be a possibility that aspects of the LGBT identity apply to one.
 - utilizing the internet to learn about and explore one's sexual orientation and gender identity and the LGBT community.
-

-
- reading about the concerns and experiences of other gay/bisexual individuals to understand one's own identity.
 - Feelings of loneliness due acknowledging differences between one's unfolding aspects of "new" identity and one's needs and one's heteronormative environment and a not yet developed sense of connection in the LGBT community.

*Affective states also present here
Differentiated from Identity Confusion by acknowledging the possibility that lgbt identity applies to one. Individuals begin to use the internet to read about experiences of others. Individuals have not yet arrived at accepting or disclosing their LBGTG identity. Therefore, it is likely that posts are either anonymous or not yet present in this dataset.

Example: *"Hey peoples of the internets please tell me where I can find interesting things #lgbt #education #live #love #selflove #whatshappening"*

ITOL Identity Tolerance

Post presents narratives about feeling a sense of validation of one's LGBT identity experiences by being able to relate to online discourses about LGBT experiences (e.g., seeing that others feel the same way).

The stage is marked by:

- Information seeking online by reading articles or books, but also actively asking for advice within the LGBT community online.
- Increased understanding of what it means for them to identify as LGBT.

*Affective states also present here

Differentiated from ICON and ICOM in increased ability to relate to experiences of other LGBT individuals.

Differentiated from ICON and ICOM by lower levels of loneliness and uncertainty.

Example: *“It wasn’t until I took theater and improv in the late 90s that I knew men could love men and that was okay. I also knew then I could love anyone, I felt love for. That was a important time. #lgbtq #awareness #selflove #selfawarness #identity #safespace”*

IACC

Identity Acceptance

Posts present narratives about feeling a stronger sense of connection, support and guidance from the LGBT community online. Individuals are starting to accept their LGBT identity and to find comfort within the LGBT community online.

Even if an individual arrived at a stage of identity acceptance, the individual might still maintain passing

strategy (attempting to fit into heteronormative worldview).

*Affective states also present here. However, individual can find comfort in LGBT community online. Differentiated from previous stages by receiving increased autonomy support from others which allows poster to find acceptance with their own LGBT identity. Increased feelings of social safeness within their online environment (being able to control online environment e.g., anonymized profile).

Example: *"the only choice I made was to be myself"*

IPRI

Identity Pride

Post present narratives about disclosing LGBT identity online, also often referred to as coming out. This can be also done anonymously within the online community before/instead of coming out in their offline environments (selective disclosure).

The stage is marked by:

- Feelings of pride of belonging to LGBT community
 - Efforts to be liked by the LGBT community rather than the heteronormative community.
 - Separating oneself from heteronormative dominant culture as ways of avoiding shame or homophobia.
-

-
- Active participation in discussions about LGBT experiences online
 - Sharing experiences, and empowering affirmations, or giving advice to others
 - Feelings of more cohesion in their lives, opportunities for validation through visibility as a sexual minority, increased satisfaction, comfort, and an increased sense of integrity

*Affective states also present here. However, often decreased.

Example: *“Be proud of who you are, and not ashamed of how someone else sees you... #selflove #selfworth #selfrespect #loveyourself #beyourself #beproud #outandproud #lgbtq #bisexual”*

IINT

Identity Integration

Poster integrates LGBT identity as part of their identity and embracing that identity in all parts of their lives.

This stage is marked by:

- Interacting with other LGBT individuals offline (e.g., transforming online relationships into offline relationships such as friends, romantic partners or sexual partners).
 - Intersectionality of an individual's/community roles/labels (e.g. being LGBT and being a woman, being Black and LGBT etc.)
-

- Arriving at a point of “Knowing who they are” (differentiates from the codes Authenticity which describes feelings of freedom and comfort to express their true selves)

*Affective states also present here.

Example: *“Some of the guys still ostracize me in my unit cuz I’m openly gay, but it’s ok cuz I still ball on them in sports. How’s that for some irony 😏 #lgbt #staytrue #beyourself #SelfLove”*

Category

3

Authenticity: Freedom of Expression of LGBT identity

Authenticity as feelings of being and practice of being one’s true self, as well as feelings of being true to that self.

Authenticity, a comfort with one’s LGB identity and with expressing one’s identity in interactions with others;

ATT

Authentic Attitude

Being unapologetically you; authentic version of oneself; living honestly; embracing one’s identity; not caring about what other people say/think; asserting personal agency. Perceived sense of liberation of judgement of others and a readiness to cross societal boundaries set by dominant group (e.g., heteronormative constructs). Differentiation from Confidence: Confidence is the belief in one's capabilities and competencies while being authentic is being true to oneself

		<p>Example: <i>“Yes, that is me in HEELS and not giving no type of way about it! Let them look I say who cares if your gay, straight, bi or anything like that, you always have to understand people and how they dress! I am a gay male and if you don't like it then LEAVE! No one can ever miss take you nor take you for granted for what are! I love everything and everyone no matter what they look like”</i></p>
APP	LGBT Appearance	<p>As people construct gay and lesbian identities, they often use clothing and appearance to announce those identities. About how one presents themselves, modify their looks, expressing body positivity (e.g., after top surgery, or new haircut, dressing gender-non-conforming, feeling free to change their looks, wearing makeup).</p> <p>Example: <i>“Look how my scars have faded”</i></p> <p>Example: <i>“so after 21 years on this planet I can finally say that I found myself in a mind frame where I can wholeheartedly say that I love the way I look and I dont care what anyone else has to say about it”</i></p>
LIP	LGBT intimacy and pleasure	<p>About ways of experiencing pleasure and intimacy (e.g., kinks, masturbation, polyamory, ...). This is closely embedded in authenticity as attraction and pleasure that vary from the heteronormative ways is seen as less valid. Based on the seven queer axioms defined by Hammack et al., 2018 this can include posts that talk about:</p>

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- being attracted to people of various gender identities (e.g., same gender, cisgender, transgender or non-binary)
 - Fluidity of attraction over lifespan
 - Structure of relationships (e.g., polyamory, and consensual non-monogamy)
 - Fetishes, Kinks and BDSM
 - Aromantic or asexual relationships

Example: *“I contributed to [@ anonymized username] article to help people on the journey toward experiencing sexual pleasure. Everyone has urges for sexual satisfaction. #sextherapyhawaii #sextherapist #noshame #lgbtqia #mindfulsex #selflove #partners #solosex #selfpleasure #masturbation”*

CSV

Commitment of Self-
Values

Feelings of authenticity by committing to one's own core beliefs and values.

- e.g., feelings of being true to oneself by standing up for or living by one's values and morals (e.g., showing support or solidarity for people with HIV).

Differentiated from Authentic Attitude: belief and value commitments provide people with a sense of purpose, direction, and self-definition.

Example: *“Hey there! We are two teenage activists looking to make the world a better place! If you are passionate about issues such as #LGBTQ, #MentalHealthAwareness, #ClimateCrisis, #BlackLivesMatter, #GunControl, #SelfLove and MORE go follow us on Instagram!”*

Example: *“We have the right to be free, to just be. Come to POP INN and leave with a pill this International Human Rights Day. #hivprevention #hivtesting #HIV #humanrightsday #internationalhumanrightsday #msm #bimen #gaymen #transmen #transwomen #lgbtqi #knowyourstatus #safesex #selflove”*

Category

4

Personal Growth

The process and the manifestation of change and growth in LGBT individuals

SLJ

Self-Love Journey

Process of becoming yourself, discovering the self, being on a path, progress not perfection, processes of change; taking back control; accomplishing things; being accountable to yourself; showing a reflective state/process; mentions of a time frame; reclaiming ownership of decision-making.

Example: *“well I just started loving myself and tbh its not here yet but here are some pics I loveee. And yeah i know i’m a bit crazy”*

Example: *“I stopped loving myself, i let myself get to a point where i was not taking care of my body! I have taken*

			<i>back the control & im winning! 🌀 i refuse to go back to that place!"</i>
	CON	Confidence / Self-esteem	<p>Appraisal of self-based on competencies, capabilities successes/failures, appearance; self-assuredness; positive self-evaluation; self-appreciation.</p> <p>Differentiation from LGBT Appearance: LGBT Appearance highlights specific features of talking about ones looks. When it comes to confidence regarding one's appearance, CON highlights self-appreciation of feeling confident about the way they look in a positive self-evaluation (non-specific "feeling myself")</p> <p>Differentiated from Authentic Attitude: ATT is living honestly in being one's true self while CON self-appraisal and belief in competencies and capabilities</p> <p>Example: "<i>#selflove is absolutely important everyone should love theirselves and feel confident about theirselves feeling good about yourself is amazing</i>"</p> <p>"See a mirror & snap it up 📺 😊....."</p> <p>"Damn! Looking so fucking #handsome 🥰👑👊👀🐱!"</p>
Category	5		<p>Queer Resilience</p> <p>Overcoming something, being stronger than before, believing you can get through difficult times, having managed to overcome something difficult</p>

SI	Social Injustices	<p>Overcoming, facing, and coping with queer hardships typically social injustices like, homophobia, transphobia, discrimination, hate speech, social isolation.</p> <p>Differentiated from ICOM or ICON: Social Injustice highlights bouncing back or pushing through adversity rather than still being in a state of adversity</p> <p>Example “[...]Navigating being born gay into a homophobic household has been one of the biggest challenges of my lifetime. But through my parents and brother I have learned the greatest lesson of all, self-love. I know that I am worthy of love just as I am. I am whole just as I was created, as are they. I hope they one day come to realize these truths. [...]”</p>
IR	Internalized Resilience	<p>Overcoming, facing, and coping with internalized hardships like mental health concerns (not exclusive) in relation to being queer. Believing you can get through difficult times.</p> <p>Example: “I used to say “please make it stop, it hurts” now I embrace the pain until it stops naturally.”</p>
Category	6	<p>Connecting with Community</p> <p><i>How are users connecting with each other online</i></p>
SS	Seeking Support	<p>Seeking support/help/answers/information/donation from others on social media relating to queer, self-love, or other struggles/issues/curiosities.</p>

Example: *"My top surgery is scheduled for March 6th with doctor Medalie. I make wrapped stone necklaces and bracelets for everyone that donates. Thank you for the support 🍷"*

PRO

Prosocial

Doing things for others (altruism, generosity); congratulating others; outreach to others to support/help them; giving back to the community; sharing advice/comforting remarks; demonstrating self-transcendent emotions (Stellar et al., 2017):

Compassion compels individuals to care for those in need
Gratitude coordinating responses to the kindness of others.

Awe helps individuals fold into cohesive collectives by leading to a reduced estimation of one's individual importance.

Example: supportive tone // offering help

"Your nightly reminder that you're human! It's ok to need to try again tomorrow, to take five minutes or even a day. Be you and be amazing"

"I am determined to survive 📖 📖 Poem from More Bees with Honey 🍯 🍯 🍯 Thank you so much for all the support that's been given for my books! I feel so blessed and it means the world to me so that many people are

			<i>interested! Thank you!!Link in my bio to Amazon if you wanna buy my books ♡"</i>
	CTE	Connection through Engagement	<p>Inviting engagement for the sake of connecting - online and offline. Inviting social media engagement through likes, comments, retweets, views. Inviting offline engagement through sharing information about events/products that means something for the community/individual; promoting a booth, event, support group, resources that go beyond social media connection (inviting offline connection).</p> <p>Example: <i>"This week's Thursday Night LGBTQ+ Support Group: Self-Love • Calling In Instead of Calling Out"</i></p> <p><i>"YELLOW ♡ ♡ ♡ ♡ HAPPY PRIDE</i></p> <p><i>KIDZ 🌪 🌪 🌪 🌪 🌪 LEAVE SOME LOVE IN THE</i></p> <p><i>COMMENTS ♡ ♡ ♡ ♡ ♡ ♡ ♡ ♡ ♡ ♡"</i></p>
	MED	Media	<p>Mentions of media/relating to popular media/creating media; quotes, lyrics, literature, cinema, artists/celebrities</p> <p>Example: <i>"Oh, mama liked the roses. But most of all she cared, about the way we learned to live and if we said our prayers."</i></p> <p>Example: <i>"A self-love book I mos def want to read 5 Life Lessons from Jonathan Van Ness's New Book 'Over The Top' via [@anonymized username]"</i></p>
Category	7		<p>Relationships and other Expressions of Love</p> <p><i>To Whom and How</i> do users express their love</p>

PAR	Partners	<p>Mentions of a partner or relationship; may include longing for a relationship</p> <p>Example: <i>“Movie night with my girlfriend 🍷 Had a wonderful day 🍷”</i></p>
FRI	Friends	<p>Mentions of friendship</p> <p>Example: <i>“Arcade games for Justins birthday and good friends and my love”</i></p>
FAM	Family	<p>Mention of family relations</p> <p>Example: <i>“Mum came all the way just to wish me a Merry Xmas 🍷 🎁 🍷 😊 Soo, enjoying the time we’re together, we want to say we hope y’all had a wonderful, blessed, peaceful and loving Xmas 🍷 🎁 and with love from my family to yours, we wish you a bright and fulfilling New Year.”</i></p>
SEL	Self-Oriented	<p>Showing self-compassion, drawing boundaries, also includes self-care like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manicure, pedicure, baths, beauty related (makeup), walk outside, “treating yourself” (e.g. tangible things) • Mindfulness strategies: yoga, meditation, breathing, journaling • Physical activity: Working out, going to the gym, running, etc. • Taking breaks (e.g., travelling, vacation, relaxing)

Example: "Late night #yoga outfit ✨" ; "Doing a little self care while watching @QueerEye and crying at least 3 times each episode. So much heart warming and inspiration wrapped up into one fabulous package.

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