
Digital Wellbeing at the Margins: Gay and Bisexual Men in the US and India

Jeremy Birnholtz

Northwestern University
Evanston, IL, USA
jeremyb@northwestern.edu

Kathryn Macapagal

Northwestern University
Chicago, IL, USA
kathryn.macapagal@northwestern.edu

Shruta Rawat

The Humsafar Trust
Mumbai, India
shruta.hst@gmail.com

Dicky Baruah

The Humsafar Trust
Mumbai, India
dicky.hst@gmail.com

Richa Vashista

The Humsafar Trust
Mumbai, India
richa.hst@gmail.com

Alpana Dange

The Humsafar Trust
Mumbai, India
alpana.dange@gmail.com

Abstract

As social technologies have matured, we have seen ample evidence of both significant benefits from their use as well as significant drawbacks. We argue here on the basis of empirical work studying two marginalized LGBTQ populations (gay and bisexual adolescents on Instagram, and adult men who have sex with men (MSM) in Mumbai, India) that marginalized populations may derive some of the strongest benefits, while also facing outsized risks relative to their peers. Designing for these individuals' digital wellbeing is complicated by this intersection of reward and risk, and we argue for considering designs that reduce these risks.

Author Keywords

Self-presentation, wellbeing, social media

Introduction

As social technologies have matured, evidence suggests both significant benefits and drawbacks from their use [2]. These drawbacks often receive outside attention, leading to calls for people to abandon technologies altogether or drastically cut back on their use to improve wellbeing [4]. Calls for abstinence are often further justified by commercial social media platforms' design for ever-increasing engagement. This often overlooks the substantial benefits that can be derived by users of these technologies, and this can be

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particularly true for marginalized populations such as isolated LGBTQ people [3].

We define digital wellbeing as the use of social technologies in a manner that contributes positively to overall mental and physical health, and self-perceived sense of wellbeing. Digital wellbeing is one component of overall wellbeing, and the extent to which one affects the other is rooted in how one uses digital technologies.

For most users of social technologies, digital wellbeing is arguably a product of the tensions between three forces: 1) design for continuous engagement, which can lead to a sense of addiction or loss of control; 2) positive returns in social, cultural or other forms of capital from using the technologies; and 3) an underlying sense of unease around online interactions and belief that these are somehow more shallow, less safe and/or less valid [4].

Our work suggests that some marginalized populations experience these tensions more acutely in that they depend heavily on the technologies for meeting others at all, but may also be even more susceptible to the challenges from design for continuous engagement and risks posed by easy connections with unknown others.

The Empirical Corpus

We have spent the past several years engaged in studies of gay and bisexual men, focusing here on two contexts: 1) 15-24 year olds who are part of an Instagram "shoutout" community, and 2) men who have sex with men in Mumbai, India.

On Instagram, Birnholtz has followed approximately 300 young gay and bisexual men, observed their

content and interactions [1], and interviewed 32 of them. We spoke about their use of Instagram and other social technologies to meet and interact with both LGBTQ and straight friends/contacts, their coming out process, their goals in using social media, what they see as benefits and drawbacks of these technologies.

In Mumbai, Birnholtz participated in a series of events around the local Pride celebration, met and spoke informally with leaders and members of the local LGBTQ community, and partnered with co-authors from a local HIV/LGBTQ community-based non-profit to conduct a multi-language interview study of 35 local men. Interviews focused on participants' use of apps to meet other men, how they present themselves on these technologies, how they assess the attractiveness and trustworthiness of others, how they perceive their own behavior, if they have changed their behavior and what they see as the benefits and drawbacks of these technologies. Macapagal has observed similar trends among Chicago adolescents, and a journal manuscript is in progress.

Key Themes

Three key themes and design questions emerge:.

Friends vs. Followers: Meaning In Numbers

Instagram participants see a clear distinction in participants' between "friends" and "followers." Friends, who they may or may not have met in real life, are people they talk to regularly, get social support from and with whom social connections are generally beneficial and important. Followers are people who participants are less close to, but value primarily for their quantity (i.e., how many followers) and behavior (e.g., liking and commenting on posts, when the

comments are supportive). There is a complex and sometimes problematic interplay between these that matters a lot for wellbeing: participants need friends for social support, but many feel they won't meet friends if they don't have followers.

Participants see their follower and engagement counts as important parts of their online persona, which is in turn important for making new friends and attracting even more followers. At the same time, many also reported that – for themselves or others – fixation on engagement led to problematic feelings or behavior such as posting increasingly provocative content for validation, deleting content when it got insufficient attention (e.g., one participant deleted any photos that did not get 'likes' within a minute of posting), or becoming obsessed with obtaining more followers and likes. Thus, aspects of design for engagement can directly impact more meaningful connections.

Innocent Until Proven Creepy

Given the combination of prioritizing one's follower count and posting provocative content for 'likes', it is perhaps not surprising that many participants had significantly older men as followers. Mostly these men were seen as innocuous and a sort of necessary evil for increasing one's engagement numbers.

Sometimes, however, they were a source of problematic and harassing behavior. Many participants, as young as 15, said they frequently received requests from older men for naked pictures including offers to pay for these. Others said their content was sometimes misinterpreted, such as when a photo of them with friends at the pool (without a shirt on) received unwanted sexualized attention.

Still others welcomed the attention, but this did not always manifest in constructive ways for longterm wellbeing. Several people were observed, for example, to have Paypal or Venmo account information and/or Amazon wishlists in their Instagram profiles for followers who wished to contribute. Others used their Instagram profiles to advertise their presence on amateur, paid pornography sites.

In these ways, positive attention from followers in this environment can quickly become sexualized in both wanted and unwanted ways, and force young people still grappling with their identities to confront forces they may not fully understand.

Identifiability and Threats to Physical Wellbeing

For participants in Mumbai, a key theme was that participants wanted to meet other MSM on dating and hookup apps for friendship, dates and sex, which they felt would improve their physical and mental wellbeing. At the same time, doing so often involved revealing identifying information about themselves, such as a face picture or meeting in person, which carries risk in a cultural context where sex between men was illegal until mid-2018 and social stigma is significant.

While some were comfortable sharing images of themselves, others were apprehensive having heard stories of abuse, blackmail (including by police) or misuse of photos. One participant described a scenario where he sent a photo a man who did not share a photo of himself, and the man said he recognized the participant and would tell his family he was gay.

At the same time, others reported clear benefits to this identifiability. For example, a participant who worked in

a hotel said he recognized his manager on Grindr. He reached out via chat and the manager helped him avoid bullying among hotel staff and offered some mentoring.

Very often these apps were the first way that participants connected with MSM and for many it was the only way they could meet others, apart from risky encounters in public places such as local train stations or park restrooms. In this way these apps allow for important identity exploration and often facilitate connection with others and coming out, while also presenting risks of abuse, stigma or marginalization.

Design for Future Digital Wellbeing

These themes suggest several possible future directions and design opportunities. Our results and experiences reinforce the belief that abstinence is not an inclusive approach to digital wellbeing, and that social technologies are likely to become more – and not less – integrated into everyday life.

Responsible design for this integration over the next several years should focus on enabling people, and particularly those in marginalized populations, to continue deriving important benefits from technology that they might not otherwise get, such as connection and social support. These results also suggest that the realm of digital wellbeing extends beyond reflection on technology use to also include threats to physical and mental wellbeing that stem from connections made online. Some key design questions and opportunities from this perspective include:

How might we design for meaningful social connections that sidestep "engagement traps" such as fixation on follower counts and feedback?

How might we design to help young people explore their identities and share content while avoiding misinterpretation and decontextualization that may result in negative feelings and harassment?

How might we reduce the dangers inherent in revealing identifying information to online contacts, particularly in high-risk contexts where disclosure may be asymmetrical?

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Sarah Shi, The Humsafar Trust and the Sexualities Project at Northwestern for research assistance and financial support.

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