

The LGBTQ Social Media Problem:  
Facebook Case Studies

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## Introduction

If you are reading this paper, chances are you probably use at least some form of social media. Platforms like Instagram, Twitter, Youtube, and Facebook have come to dominate our lives, for better or worse. Facebook especially has exploded from small platform created in a college dorm to a site used by over two billion people daily. Its power over our lives is undeniable, so it should be held to a high standard when protecting and caring for its users. Yet, many groups have faced systemic biases on the platform, and the LGBTQ community is no exception. From advertisements being unfairly taken down, to user data being sold and used for not always the most benevolent purposes, the issues queer people still face on Facebook are many. Over my summer I have looked into these algorithmic biases, why they happen, and what can be done to hopefully fix them. It is a difficult task, but it must be undertaken for the health and safety of the LGBTQ community.

## Content Filtering

The first half of my project looks at content filtering, or how LGBTQ related content is understood and moderated by the Facebook platform. I will be looking primarily at LGBTQ-related advertisements, and how they are affected by both computer algorithm moderation and human content moderators. I will also be looking at Facebook's controversial "Real Name" policy, and its disproportionate effects on members of the LGBTQ community.

## Advertisements

One of Facebook's most powerful tools as a platform is its advertising capabilities. In 2016 alone, Facebook made \$27.6 billion in revenue, much due to its advertising capabilities.<sup>1</sup> As of 2019, it has 2.41 billion monthly active users around the world.<sup>2</sup> Its power to easily connect businesses to potential customers is unparalleled. It's easy to see that Facebook has a duty to its customers to ensure businesses are both acting fairly and being treated equally. Yet, multiple times it has not done so. The LGBTQ community has been disproportionately affected by the policies Facebook has implemented in recent years, beginning with the events of the Cambridge Analytica scandal from 2015-2017.

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<sup>1</sup> Vaidhyathan, Siva. *Anti-Social Media How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> "Company Info." Facebook Newsroom. Facebook, Inc., n.d. <https://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>.

## The Cambridge Analytica Scandal and its Effects

Although many people are either familiar with or have heard of Facebook's scandal with Cambridge Analytica, it would be good to refresh what happened. In 2016, the data firm Cambridge Analytica was hired by the political campaign for Ted Cruz to collect data on Facebook users. It was owned by billionaire Robert Mercer and at one time lead by Steve Bannon, both Republican voices who would later be influential in Donald Trump's campaign. The firm worked with Aleksandr Kogan, a Russian-American professor of psychology at Cambridge University, who built an app to collect data on users to be sold to them. The app was called "thisisyourdigitallife," which paid users to take a personality test and claimed to be "for academic use."<sup>3</sup> Facebook's policy at the time allowed him to also collect data on the test takers friends, allowing for personality data of "50 million raw profiles" to be collected and sold. Although "no passwords or 'sensitive pieces of information'" were collected, information on each user's location was.<sup>4</sup> The collected data was later bought by the Trump campaign, and used to create "personalized political advertisements" for potential voters, in order to influence how they would eventually vote on election day.<sup>5</sup> Although Mark Zuckerberg testified that Facebook had obtained confirmation from multiple parties that the data was deleted, allegations of wrongdoing opened forced Facebook to open an investigation in 2018 to verify the "veracity of these certifications," including hiring "a forensic auditor to conduct a forensic audit of

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<sup>3</sup> Granville, "Facebook and Cambridge Analytica."

<sup>4</sup> Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, "Revealed."

<sup>5</sup> Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, "Revealed."

Cambridge Analytica's systems.”<sup>6</sup> As of now, there still is no explicit proof all 87 million users' data has been deleted.

After this intense public scrutiny, one major change implemented was new requirements for ads related to “politics or issues of national importance.” This category, updated in June 2019, is now called “social issues, elections, or politics.” Advertisers must go through a process to be approved to run ads in this category. If an ad is labeled by Facebook as about “social issues, elections, or politics,” and the advertiser has the authorization, the ad will run as long as it does not violate any other Community Standards. If the ad is labeled as such and the advertiser does not have the authorization, the ad is temporarily taken down. The advertiser can either appeal the label, and have the ad to be put back up if Facebook decides they made a mistake, or have it put back up once they complete the authorization process. In an effort for greater transparency, Facebook also created the Ad Library, which contains information on every ad ran on the platform within the past seven years.<sup>7</sup> Searching the library with keywords only shows ads under the “social issues, elections, or politics” category, while searching for a specific page allows the user to see every ad ran by that page. I detail my personal methodology for researching with the Ad Library later in the “LGBTQ Ads in the Facebook Ad Library” case study.

The authorization process to run advertisements about “social issues, elections, or politics” includes setting up two-factor authentication, confirming a mailing address in the

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *Zuckerberg Responses To Judiciary Committee Questions For The Record*, Facebook Inc. Menlo Park, CA: Facebook Inc., 2018. Online, <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Zuckerberg%20Responses%20to%20Judiciary%20Committee%20QFRs.pdf> (accessed 25 August 2019).

<sup>7</sup> “Ad Library.”

country the advertisers wishes to run ads in, and uploading some form of identification.<sup>8</sup> To confirm the validity of the mail address, Facebook mails a letter with a code to the address to be entered on the identification confirmation site. For the identification, Facebook runs the data through a “third party service provider” to help confirm the identity. In my case, I was told that Facebook “could not match my data,” and so I had to fill out and have notarized an Affidavit of Identity.

## **How Ads Are Reviewed and Categorized**

On Facebook’s end, they use both computer algorithms and human moderators to review ads before they are posted. The system is “mostly automated” though, as many advertisements are approved in mere minutes.<sup>9</sup> The platform uses a “machine learning classifier” that scans every ad before it is ran.<sup>10</sup> Although there is no explicit answer as to how much or what specifically is automatically vs. manually reviewed, anything that lands under the category of “social issues, elections, or politics” is likely to take longer to be approved.

Again, Facebook is intentionally vague with the details of the machine learning classifier involved in reviewing advertisements. Under Facebook’s official policies, “social issues” include everything from civil rights and immigration to the environment and abortion.<sup>11</sup> Although the

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<sup>8</sup> “Getting Authorized to Run Ads about Social Issues, Elections or Politics.”

<sup>9</sup> Julia Angwin, “Facebook (Still) Letting Housing Advertisers Exclude Users by Race.”

<sup>10</sup> Berke, “What Small Publishers Need to Know about Facebook’s Policy on Ads with Political Content.”

<sup>11</sup> “Social Issues.”

platform claims not to simply immediately label content that contains words like “gay” or “LGBTQ” as political, the data in the Ad Library strongly suggests otherwise. Additionally, if any dangerous biases like these exist in a machine learning application’s training set, those biases only get stronger if left alone. For example, as more and more ads related to LGBTQ-issues are flagged as about “social issues, elections, or politics,” the association between these categories only strengthens. Even if an advertiser appeals the flagging, it most likely is dealt with on a case by case basis and not used to better train the classifier.

### **Case Study: LGBTQ Ads in the Facebook Ad Library**

For this project, I searched through the Ad Library, collecting LGBTQ-related ads not about politics that were labeled as under “social issues, elections, or politics.” I also collected LGBTQ-related ads that were not under the “social issues, elections, or politics” category. I specifically used the [Ad Library Report](#), which lets users search by different advertisers, and went to the pages that came up when I searched terms like “LGBT” and “LGBTQ.” I also collected data on the amount of money each page spent on ads, as well as what portion of that was spent on ads removed for not having the “social issues, elections, or politics” disclaimer. All of the ads are in a Zotero library I created, all stored as PDFs.

Out of 31 different advertisers looked at, 78 of total 167 ads had been at some point removed for not having the “social issues, elections, or politics” disclaimer. Out of the total of \$13,421 dollars for these ads, about \$7,498 of that was spent on the ads taken down for no disclaimer. Although Facebook does not provide information on how long these ads were



supposed to run for, this is money spent by advertisers that, because of the penalty for not having the disclaimer, was not fully utilized.

Of these ads, the majority were advertisements for some sort of product, usually rainbow colored and related to LGBTQ pride. A good amount were also advertisements for some sort of public event, such as events at a gay nightclub, queer counseling session, or pride parade. Only advertisements lacking the “social issues, elections, or politics” classification were ones that were still active; thus, the possibility exists they may still inevitably be labeled with the classification and taken down. Although about social issues (LGBTQ issues), these types of ads do not take “a position on or advocate for or against social issues, as well as ads that are focused on policies or reform related to those issues,” a key part of Facebook’s definition.<sup>12</sup> The idea that everything LGBTQ-related is posted for attention or for political purposes is dangerous, and defines our very existence as always political. In Kornak’s analysis of Phelon’s work *Sexual Strangers*, he says that Phelon “questions the language that is used to discuss political matters because it assumes the liberal vision of the subject as an autonomous subject.”<sup>13</sup> Specifically related to the “queer” experience, placing queer actions alongside traditionally regulated political categories, like Republican/Democrat or Liberal/Conservative, creates a discourse that posits queer experience and anti-queer bigotry as equals. Although LGBTQ issues can definitely be politicized, such as around candidates or certain laws, disregarding the difference between daily life and politics prevents the normalization of queer experiences. Thus, this continued

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<sup>12</sup> “How Ads about Social Issues, Elections or Politics Are Reviewed (with Examples).”

<sup>13</sup> Jacek Kornak, “Queer as a Political Concept,” (Academic dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2015), <https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/152620/queerasa.pdf?sequence=1>

categorization of LGBTQ advertisements as political infringes upon the community's rights to equally utilize the Facebook platform.

## **Human Content Moderators**

Although Facebook increasingly touts its use of Machine Learning and Artificial Intelligence as means to regulate its platform, human reviewers still play an instrumental part in keeping the website as is. If a user reports an advertisement for violating some policy, it usually goes to a human reviewer. As such, if a homophobic or transphobic reviewer gets to choose whether to keep a queer-related post or advertisement down or not, most likely it will stay down. Additionally, queer and trans artists are more likely to have posts removed for being too “sexually explicit.”<sup>14</sup> According to Facebook, “nudity is typically very easy to establish and can be reviewed within seconds,” and can be reviewed by “reviewers around the world regardless of language.”<sup>15</sup> Connotations around sexuality and the body vary across every culture, thus something meant as educational or artistic could be quickly labeled as “nudity” and taken down.

## **Case Study: The “Real Name” Policy**

A core part of Facebook's philosophy for creating an online community, this policy has faced great protest for years. According to its official policy, “Facebook is a community where

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<sup>14</sup> Staff, “Queer and Feminist Brands Say They Are Being Blocked from Running Ads on Instagram and Facebook.”

<sup>15</sup> “Hard Questions.”

everyone uses the name they go by in everyday life.” Yet, this policy has over the years disproportionately affected members of the LGBTQ community, namely transgender users and drag performers. Although the policy is not highly enforced, when it is applied it can be dangerous and a breach of policy.

For transgender users, being able to change ones name is often a necessary step in their transition. Being able to try out multiple names, before legally committing to one, can be very beneficial to ones health and confidence. Social media is a common medium for transgender users to easily “try out” new names, yet the “Real Name” policy can exacerbate that process. Although there is a process in place for appealing a violation of the policy, transgender users risk outing themselves and being forced to provide formal identification. Obviously, the name on the ID might not match the name they are using for their profile. Additionally, for users trying to escape abusive families, having to return to their “dead name” for any period of time could put them in danger. Additionally, many drag performers have been affected the policy. Many use their stage name on their personal Facebook profile. Although Facebook encourages the use of a Facebook page, instead of a profile, for entertainers who go by a different name, this is much less personal and not as conducive for interacting with ones fans. Although one drag queen has to date helped over 200 users appeal the policy and get their profiles back, she is not compensated by Facebook for her time.<sup>16</sup>

Although Facebook has made some changes to the policy, such as requiring reporters to provide good reason for reporting someone’s name as “fake,” and allowing users to choose

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<sup>16</sup> Levin, “As Facebook Blocks the Names of Trans Users and Drag Queens, This Burlesque Performer Is Fighting Back.”

LGBTQ identity as a reason for having a different name, the system still places those affected in hard situations.<sup>17</sup> When considering that the policy mainly is applied when users report others, this can easily be a tactic for harassment of those most vulnerable.

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<sup>17</sup> Dec 16, September 8, and 2018, “Facebook Makes Changes to ‘real Names’ Policy after Complaints | CBC News.”

## **User Targeting**

The second half of my project looks at how the LGBTQ community is targeted on the Facebook platform. I'll be looking into ads targeting queer users ran by the Internet Research Agency from 2015-2017. I'll also look at one company who targeted conversion therapy ads at gay users, and the implications of Russia's data sharing threats.

### **Micro-targeting**

Quickly becoming one of advertisers greatest tools on social media, micro-targeting can be both connect community and be abused to divide them. It consists of using massive amounts of data collected about users, from their interests, the pages they have liked or clicked on, their behavior, to tailor ads to increasingly smaller groups of people. It has been extensively utilized in elections, especially in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Its almost impossible to use the Facebook platform and not be targeted in some way or another, and the LGBTQ community has been targeted often.

When creating advertisements, Facebook allows "Detailed Targeting" for users who match any number of characteristics. These include interests like "gay pride," "gay life," "gay news," "LGBT community," "LGBT culture," "lesbian pride," "gender identity," and "genderqueer," among others. Facebooks labels users under these categories based on a variety of factors. It uses information on the pages users and their friends like, and information in both a user's Facebook and Instagram profiles. It also uses information that users shared with

businesses, like “signing up for an email newsletter” and “making purchases at retail stores.” The platform also uses user’s location data, such as “where you connect to the internet” and “where you use your phone.”<sup>18</sup> Although user’s are able to see these categories in their profile information, and even remove them, if the user repeats their behavior they will most likely come back. Users can access this data by going to their “Settings,” and then clicking on the tab called “Ads.” Users can also download all the data Facebook has collected on them by instead clicking on the “Your Facebook Information” tab, and then clicking “Download Your Information.”

Facebook also allows advertisers to exclude users from seeing their ads, based on similar qualities. Now though, the options to exclude for interests like “LGBT Community” or “gay pride” have been removed. Yet, it still may be possible to create ads that specifically exclude the LGBTQ community. Although the option to exclude based on LGBTQ-related categories was removed, advertisers can still exclude previous lookalike and/or custom audiences. Although I was not able to test running any ads myself, it might be possible for an advertiser to run fake ads targeted at the LGBTQ community, and then exclude that audience from seeing their actual ads. Admittedly, this is quite the workaround, but considering the number of defunct vaguely queer ads already running on the platform, it would not be difficult to do this.

### **Case Study: Russian Ads Targeting the LGBTQ Community 2015-2017**

In the aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, an investigation by the House Intelligence Committee revealed there were approximately 3000 ads bought and ran by the

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<sup>18</sup> “About Facebook Ads.”

“Russia-based Internet Research Agency between 2015 and 2017.”<sup>19</sup> The purpose of these ads was not to support any one candidate in the election, but to gain following among groups of various identities and influence their ultimate voting behavior. Groups were targeted based on qualities like race (stoking conversation about topics like police brutality and racial inequality), political leaning (conservative or liberal), immigration (whether for open immigration or against), and sexuality. The vast majority of LGBTQ related ads were ran by the “LGBT United” Facebook page. I went through the released ads and compiled every one specifically targeting LGBTQ users. This totaled to 144 of the approximately 3,000 ads released.

One of the ads specifically targeted Hillary Clinton’s record on taking money from anti-LGBTQ groups, attempting to get users to not vote for her. Although many of the ads are written in an awkward tone, such as one their first posts describing the page as “Everyday news, updates, coming outs, and much more,” most would not warrant a second-glance or a report from users. For a first attempt at fooling and appealing to the American LGBTQ community, the potential for another attempt is frightening. The technology has only evolved since the last presidential election, and the “social issues, elections, or politics” authorization is not difficult to work around. I’m not an advertiser or business owner, and I managed to get through the process with little difficulty. Although the threat of this happening in the United States again is scary enough, the idea that it may be a tactic being used by the Russian government to persecute its own queer citizens is even more disturbing.

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<sup>19</sup> “Russian Ads Released by Congress | Facebook Newsroom.”

## **Case Study: Conversion Therapy Ads Targeted at Gay Men**

Although this is a small and unique occurrence, it is nonetheless foreshadowing of other issues that could occur. According to an investigation by the Telegraph, in summer 2018 there were multiple reports of queer users being targeted by conversion therapy ads.<sup>20</sup> The ad, although not explicitly hateful, preyed on user's self doubts by offering "help for men with same-sex attraction" and "a path to sexual purity."<sup>21</sup> This obviously can be very damaging to user's mental health, especially ones that are not publicly out and are worried about being outed. Although isolated, this is evidence Facebook is not doing enough to ensure that advertisers have good intentions when targeting certain groups of users. It's entirely possible for others to follow this case, targeting queer Facebook users with hateful threatening advertisements or ones meant to trick them into a scam.

## **Case Study: Russian Government Forcing Tinder to share Data**

Although this is not directly about Facebook's platform, it could have consequences for it in the near future. In early 2019, the popular dating app Tinder was added to a list of companies who "have agreed to store user data and messages in Russia and to share that data with Russian government and intelligence agencies."<sup>22</sup> This would give the Russian government and law

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<sup>20</sup> Gillchrist, "Conversion Therapy Ads Preyed on LGBTQ Facebook Users."

<sup>21</sup> Horton and Cook, "Facebook Accused of Targeting Young LGBT Users with 'gay Cure' Adverts."

<sup>22</sup> Harrison, "Russia Targets Tinder as a Warning to Facebook and Twitter."



enforcement access to user's private data on the app. Besides being a blatant breach of privacy, this would endanger the lives of LGBTQ users on the app. Yet, according to some reports, this move is intended to threaten massive social media companies like Facebook and Twitter to also comply with the law. Although the Russian government has already tried to make Russian users' data accessible, they were only fined 3,000 rubles (around \$46 dollars) for not complying. Additionally, there are reports the fines for not complying could be raised to "as much as 1 percent of a company's annual revenue in Russia."<sup>23</sup>

If threats continue to exacerbate, and Facebook eventually complies with the data-sharing law, the lives of members of the LGBTQ community in Russia would be endangered. The government would be able to view the information users have provided on their sexuality and gender, such as in the personal information section of their profile. The friend networks of these users would also become accessible, and since law enforcement already forces detainees to share the names of other queer people, it is likely this information would be abused as well. Even if users have no information on their sexuality in their profile, Facebook's capability to predict users interest in LGBTQ-related topics based on their search history, location, and friends would still put them in danger.

Looking at this event and the LGBTQ-focused ads ran by the Russian government in the 2016 election, it is apparent that they have a grasp on how to masquerade as and appeal to members of the LGBTQ community on social media. Especially if the government continues to force smaller companies to store their data on accessible servers, it will be harder for larger ones like Facebook to resist.

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<sup>23</sup> Harrison, "Russia Targets Tinder as a Warning to Facebook and Twitter."

## Not Within Scope of Project

There are many more issues affecting the LGBTQ community on social media that were not able to be fully researched within the scope of this project.

Although there is monetized content on Facebook besides advertisements, there have not been as many reports of content demonetization here as on other platforms. Notably being Youtube and its owner Google, many times LGBTQ content has been flagged as either sexual or vaguely “not suitable for advertisers.”<sup>24</sup> LGBTQ creators make content for educational purposes, for children and adolescents questioning their gender identity/sexuality, and for the general public, among other purposes. This issue impacts the ability of these creators to continue their livelihood and serve the community. Also, there is currently a class action lawsuit launched against the two platforms by a group dubbing themselves the “Rainbow Coalition,” for unfair demonetization of their content.<sup>25</sup> This video by the plaintiffs explains why they are suing Youtube and Google. Although there are many news articles on this phenomenon, there is still a lack of published formal academic research that would provide a more general scope and analysis of this bias.

Additionally, the search algorithms used by social media platforms have had issues with either LGBTQ content not showing or hate speech showing up in search results. Both Twitter and Tumblr have had problems in the past with not showing results for terms like “bisexual” or

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<sup>24</sup> Khaled, “A History of YouTube Undermining Its LGBT+ Creators.”

<sup>25</sup> Cheves, “Eight YouTube Creators Sue Google for Bias Against LGBTQ Content.”

“transgender,” as they were automatically associated to be sexually explicit.<sup>26</sup> Although they are now removed, the Yelp platform has had issues with letting transphobic terms like “Tranny Bars” and “Shemale Clubs” show up in search queries.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, cyberbullying is still a problem on social media, and members of the LGBTQ community are still disproportionately affected. According to a 2017 study by anti-bullying group Ditch the Label, 37% of people between 12 and 20 who had been bullied were bullied on Facebook.<sup>28</sup> Although Facebook is no longer quite the frontrunner, a 2013 study found that “87% of teenagers who’d been bullied reporting that it’d happened on Facebook.”<sup>29</sup> Although it has not been implemented, researchers at MIT developed BullySpace, a “common sense knowledge base that encodes particular knowledge about bullying situations.”<sup>30</sup> Essentially, its an automatic way of understanding when cyberbullying is happening and suggesting reactions/dialogue prompts as a way of curbing it.

Although these are not the only issues affecting the LGBTQ community on social media, the situation has been improving as companies realize how important tackling these problems are.

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<sup>26</sup> Allen, “Social Media Giants Have a Big LGBT Problem. Can They Solve It?”

<sup>27</sup> Allen, “Social Media Giants Have a Big LGBT Problem. Can They Solve It?”

<sup>28</sup> Thompson, “Facebook Is No Longer the Worst Social Network for Online Bullying.”

<sup>29</sup> Thompson, “Facebook Is No Longer the Worst Social Network for Online Bullying.”

<sup>30</sup> Dinakar et al., “Common Sense Reasoning for Detection, Prevention, and Mitigation of Cyberbullying.”

## Recommendations to Address These Issues

Although steps taken since the 2016 election have been beneficial, it is obvious that many are being caught in the crossfire of the crackdown on political advertisements. For the LGBTQ community, its critical for benevolent ads to be able to run smoothly and without the threat of being taken down always looming. Facebook should remove “social issues” from the “social issues, elections, or politics” category entirely. The machine learning classifier used when checking advertisements needs to be able to distinguish between political and non-political ads. If an advertisement makes no mention of a politician, current legislation, or voting in an election, it poses much less of a threat.

Although the “Real Name” policy has not been in the news recently, it still is impacting the ability of transgender users and drag performers to go about their lives on Facebook. Considering that the policy is often only applied when others report accounts, it serves more as a means of harassing queer users than of protecting them. The policy should be scrapped entirely, as it encroaches upon the ability of users to be free and safe, and offers little benefit. One study found that, “pseudonymous users wrote better comments (and more of them) than those who were using their real names.”<sup>31</sup> Another study, by professors at Carnegie Melon University, also found that “real-name policies actually increased the frequency of offensive words.”<sup>32</sup> Facebook is one of the last major social media platforms to require one’s “real name,” and its past time for the policy to change.

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<sup>31</sup> Mackinnon, “Google Plus Finally Ditches Its Ineffective, Dangerous Real-Name Policy.”

<sup>32</sup> Mackinnon, “Google Plus Finally Ditches Its Ineffective, Dangerous Real-Name Policy.”

In terms of user targeting, there needs to be more oversight when targeting certain demographic groups. The platform should be able to recognize that allowing content like conversion therapy to be advertised is dangerous to the LGBTQ community, and should not be allowed to be ran. Although it can be beneficial for advertisers to be able to more easily connect with the queer community, information on users' gender identity and sexuality needs to be respected and protected.

## Conclusions

This project has become something much different than what I originally set out to do. Although I wanted to focus more on the algorithmic aspects of these issues, I underestimated how secretive Facebook is with specifics like these. I still have learned a great deal about the issues still facing the LGBTQ community on Facebook, and what still needs to be done.

Although it seems like the company truly does have the interest of the community in its heart, no policy or solution is perfect. That's why it is still so important to keep researching and fighting and trying to make this platform work for everyone. It is important to remember that these issues are not just about quality of life; problems like privacy and data protection can be life and death situations, especially in places where queer people are oppressed. Facebook has the power to help the LGBTQ community be safe and thrive online, and we just have to push them to keep moving forward.

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