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https://doi.org/10.1108/QROM-11-2024-2871)

Broadcasting LGBT+ support:

The scope and limitations of presenting allyship

Abstract

Purpose

Advance knowledge about LGBT+ allies, their role and contribution, and how they voice support.

Design/methodology/approach

The research is based on an innovative video booth methodology capturing short video messages recorded by LGBT+ allies. A video booth is like a passport photo booth with an affixed tablet for video recording. The booth was placed in eight organisations during LGBT+ history month, inviting people to talk about their working lives and experiences of LGBT+ networks[1].

Findings

Due to sensitivities around identification, the findings are presented in the form of composite narratives of fictionalised characters composed by the researchers. Four versions of support were voiced by LGBT+ allies: 'the proud ally', 'corporate scripting', 'professional/personal journey' and 'pointing at others'. Employing Goffman's theory on presentation of self and scholarship on impression management, we illustrate how support is performed for the public and in public, using innovative data and methods of presenting it back to the public.

[1] Also known as affinity groups or employee resource groups.

Originality

The article expands scholarship on LGBT+ allies by explaining the scope and limits of voicing, and potentially actioning, support. It also illustrates the value of using composite narratives when researching sensitive topics in management and/or organisations.

Keywords

Composite narratives, impression management, LGBT+ allies, LGBT+ employee networks, presentation of self, voicing support.

Introduction

Given the push for LGBT+ allies and the overwriting view that they offer vital support and resources to our communities, we know surprisingly little about them, especially what they do and how they show support. To date, most studies have focused on profiling allies (Burgess and Baunach, 2014; Fingerhut, 2011; Fletcher and Marvell, 2023; Henry *et al*., 2021; Jones and Brewster, 2017; Montgomery and Stewart, 2012; Poteat, 2015; Stotzer, 2009), developing reliable ally identity measures (Ji and Fujimoto, 2013; Jones *et al*., 2014; López-Sáez *et al*., 2022), exploring ally (identity) development (Asta and Vacha-Haase, 2013; Borgman, 2009; Duhigg *et al*., 2010; Gershon, 2020; Grzanka *et al.*, 2015; Hubbard *et al*., 2013; Perrin *et al*., 2014; Russell and Bohan, 2016), along with ally motivation and rewards (Moss *et al*., 2021; Rostosky *et al.*, 2015; Wahlström *et al*., 2018). In effect, we have identified a range of factors that help explain why some people are more likely to become allies than others, and what allies gain in return. As scholars, we also seem keen to specify what allies *should* do (see, for example, Bell *et al*., 2021) and fundamentally explain why some allies are effective, when others are not (Edwards, 2006).

Helping to fill this gap, we draw on a series of self-recorded video messages produced by the video booth methodology. As a part of a larger study into LGBT+ employee networks[2], the video booth was placed at National Health Service (NHS) events during LGBT+ history month to document the experiences of staff who identify as LGBT+ and their allies, giving more people a voice and allowing us to further develop our understanding of LGBT+ employee networks. In this paper, we explore how allies frame their support publicly via a video booth. Our analysis is aided by Goffman's (1959) framework of 'front'-, 'back'- and 'off'-stage performances to help explain the performative and corrective devices at play when voicing support in public and to the public. To build our case, we present four stories of ally support which we classify as: 'the proud ally', 'corporate scripting', 'professional/personal journey' and 'pointing at others'. These stories are not the original ones but are created by the research team, merging multiple recordings to convey messages, or what Willis (2019) refers to as composite narratives. As a method, composite narratives have gained traction for both ethical and practical reasons, to protect identities, present complex ideas, improve readability and generate impact with a broader appeal (Biglino *et al*., 2017; Hancock, 2021; Johnston *et al*., 2023; McElhinney and Kennedy, 2021; Mees-Buss and Welch, 2019; Porter and Byrd, 2023). To us, ensuring anonymity is of utmost importance. Composite narratives allow us to present stories that would have been silenced otherwise. By sharing them, we respond to Rumens' (2016) call for greater understanding of how allies can help LGBT people to disrupt heteronormativity, and we illustrate ways of voicing ally support and the level of impression management (IM) involved/required in speaking to the public.

Our main contributions are twofold. First, we explain how ally support is voiced and presented publicly, providing vital empirical evidence on how support is narrated and

[2] While some networks had been named without referring to acronyms, for example 'Voice', most networks used a combination of acronyms as a prefix to either 'staff' or 'employee' networks. We opted for 'LGBT+ employee networks', the most common combination of acronyms.

portrayed by the allies themselves. Second, we show how all three elements from Goffman's work – front-, back- and off-stage – can be observed with the video booth methodology. The video booth is not fully private or public. In practical terms, once contributors shut the curtain inside the booth, they can expect only partial privacy. With no direct audience, the performance is delivered to an imaginary audience (during recording) and to self (during playback). The contributor then either accepts the performance and submits the recording, or rejects it and attempts a second performance through a retake. Thus, both front- and back-stage performance can occur in the same space, inside the video booth. Essentially the contributions are neither real or fake but need to be understood as performances of certain characteristics, which leads us to ask: Do the impressions match the standards of conduct?

The structure of this article is as follows. First, we review allyship literature. Then we explain key concepts from Goffman's 1959 pioneering work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and flesh out the literature on IM. After this we explain the methodology and the rationale for using composite narratives. We then present our findings, conveying stories of ally support. Each narrative is presented in two ways: in first person, replicating the format of the original recordings, and then in third person, with supplementary analysis from the research team. Next, we discuss the narratives in detail and illustrate how IM both shapes and limits stories of allies' support, reducing it to pride, passive learning, a script or the blaming of others. Finally, we speak back to scholarship on allyship and bring the article to a close by exploring what our findings imply in practice, what lessons can be learned from these stories about the role of allies, and what this means for our communities.

Allyship

The motivation to become an ally has been reported to shape both the focus and the outcome of ally work. To explain different modalities of allyship, scholars have adopted a variety of

terminology, where the focus of ally work is largely understood to comprise two (Philips *et al.*, 2024) or three levels (Dang and Joshi, 2023; De Souza and Schmader, 2024). A two-level focus concerns a) the self, driven by 'self interest' (Edwards, 2006), also referred to as 'self ally work' (Dang and Joshi, 2023), 'intrapersonal' (De Souza and Schmader, 2024) or self-enhancement (Philips *et al.*, 2024), or b) others, referred to as 'relational ally work' (Dang and Joshi, 2023), 'interpersonal' (De Souza and Schmader, 2024), or self-transcendence (Philips *et al.,* 2024). The third additional level attends to the organisation, through 'organizational ally work' (Dang and Joshi, 2023) or 'institutional' (De Souza and Schmader, 2024). Those who take a broad view (i.e. all heterosexual cisgender people including themselves) embrace non-normative action that challenges the norms of the dominant social system, and ultimately produces a different outcome (Radke *et al.,* 2020). In contrast, adopting a narrow focus (e.g. on perpetrators or other cisgender heterosexual people) triggers a normative action that supports, rather than challenges the current situation (Radke *et al.,* 2020). Ally work of this kind has been described as 'disingenuous', eliciting what has been labelled as 'performative allyship', largely characterised by easy, visible and low-cost actions that maintain the status quo (Kutlaca and Radke, 2023). While performative allyship can have detrimental effects, authentic allyship has its own limitations where demonstrating support for cisgender women is only beneficial in a gender balanced context (Lyubykh *et al*., 2024). Given the LGBT+ communities only form a fraction of the general population and they are almost without exception a minority in any given workplace, this raises some troubling questions about the effectiveness of authentic LGBT+ allyship, and indeed, if this issue can be compensated as Lyubykh and colleagues argue, with storytelling.

Allies have both been critiqued for lack of action and for the potential to cause harm (Blatt, 2024; Bourke, 2020). As explained earlier, self interest can mean that allies are looking to educate themselves rather than others. They are also less likely to support initiatives that

only benefit minority groups. As a result, ally engagement can be selective, focusing on easy, tokenistic tasks, often referred to as 'fair weather allies' (Reason and Broido, 2005), that effectively amplify ally voices while muting others. This puts the emphasis on wanting to be seen for doing the work and to be recognised as an ally by others, where allyship can be switched on and off, or even limited to their professional roles (Ryan *et al*., 2013). Allies have also been critiqued for "helping" individuals rather than challenging/addressing systems, and failing to recognise their privilege and what role it plays in the struggles minority groups face. Bhattacharyya *et al*. 's (2024) work describes these power dynamics well and how 'fragile' or 'paternalistic' ally support is unidirectional and thus less effective than 'accomplice' allyship where power is shared. Furthermore, paternalistic allyship is conditional, depending on the 'deservingness' of the minority group. This point is also argued by Blatt (2024) who explains how easily ally support can be withdrawn and the pressure on minority groups must keep allies engaged. Albeit well intentioned, allyship can be ineffective and even reinforce inequality, presenting a mismatch between intentions (of dominant groups) and outcomes (for minority groups).

Scholarship on how the ally identity affects heteronormativity and heterosexual privilege is mixed. Grazanka and colleagues (2015) explain that allies do not always share their identity. This is because allyship is not compatible with heteronormativity and doing allyship can place heterosexual privilege at risk. By contrast, Gershon (2020) along with Duhigg and colleagues (2010) maintain that being a public ally helps. First and foremost, because it prevents the possibility of being perceived as queer (by association) and therefore circumvents queer hostility (Gershon, 2020), but also, because it helps keep heterosexual privilege intact (Duhigg *et al*., 2010). What scholars seem to agree on is that allies are sensitive to feedback on their work (Grazanka *et al.,* 2015), especially from LGBT+ communities (Asta and Vacha-Hasse, 2013). Accordingly, Birnbaum *et al*. (2024) find that if allies expect that

their allyship is appreciated, they are more likely to engage in allyship actions (yet allies tend to underestimate how much their work is appreciated by the allied). Overall, this leaves a wide knowledge gap on when and how ally identities are shared, particularly in circumstances when immediate feedback is not possible. Equally, how allies express support.

Presentation of self

Goffman (1959) explains how people present themselves to others. At times this can be done in a 'thoroughly calculating manner' (p. 6), where they express themselves in a certain way to give a particular impression to others and expect a particular response in return. Albeit calculated, the act can be either unconscious or conscious. In the latter case, the individual acts in accordance with group traditions or social status requirements, yet without anticipating the response from others. Nevertheless, to '*be* a given kind of person' is not simply about commanding required attributes but also about maintaining 'the standards of conduct and appearance' of one's social group (Goffman, 1959, p. 75, italics in original). This implies that presentation of self, or 'performance' by an individual, is not automatically 'fake' or 'calculating'. More to the point, an individual with specific social characteristics who projects these to others (either implicitly or explicitly) will be in a position to demand due respect and be treated accordingly – in spite of their intent. As a result, the individual forfeits any claim to be something they do not appear to be. Goffman (1959, p. 13) classifies this as the 'moral character of projections'; in plain terms, this means that claiming an identity to an audience has significant implications. For example, stating (or fostering the impression) that you are an 'LGBT+ ally' conveys that you subscribe to specific treatment of and responses from other people, while forgoing other reactions.

Claiming to be something you are not is, of course, possible. This is what Goffman (1959, p. 60) refers to as 'impersonation'. In some situations, however, the concept of

impersonation is not clear-cut. For instance, claims to be a management student can be validated, but claims to be 'a friend, a true believer, or a music-lover can be confirmed or disconfirmed only more or less' (Goffman, 1959, p. 60). Hence, the status of being an 'LGBT+ ally' is not an objective fact that can be confirmed or rejected in a binary yes/no or valid/invalid fashion. More to the point, our intention here is not to expose 'imposters', but rather to explore *how* individuals portray themselves as allies in front of the video camera (and the imagined public audience) and *by what means* they frame and present the concept of 'support' to LGBT+ communities. To achieve this, the context, or the 'front', as Goffman frames it, needs to be considered. In his view, a 'front' refers to 'that part of the individual's performance that regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance' (Goffman, 1959, p. 22). In practical terms, the 'front' is the 'expressive equipment' of a performance which can be intentional or unintentional (Goffman, 1959, p. 22). A front constitutes the 'setting', with 'stage props' such as furniture, decorations and other background items that form the 'scenery' in different layouts for performances (Goffman, 1959, p. 22). In terms of the performer, Goffman (1959) uses the term 'personal front' to refer to other expressive items such as clothing, posture, facial expressions and body language, as well as characteristics such as age, sex and race (pp. 23–24). To align with this, when analysing the video recordings we considered multiple elements of the personal front that each speaker presented in front of the camera. To be specific, we watched the videos multiple times, paying attention to gestures such as body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, pauses and eye movements. Furthermore, even though the 'setting' inside the booth was relatively fixed, some individuals brought their own 'stage props' for their 'performance', including rainbow flags, regalia and/or badges.

The ability to present yourself effectively/successfully to others is not a given. In reality, projections may be contradicted, discredited or disrupted, causing embarrassment (to

the performer) and/or confusion (to the audience). In an attempt to avoid or compensate for these disruptions and to keep the impression intact, preventive and corrective practices are employed, in the form of 'defensive practices' used by the performer and/or 'protective practices' (Goffman, 1959, p. 13) exercised by the audience. The video booth presents an interesting twist to this, where the speaker projects themselves to an imagined audience who are not physically there but can be everywhere virtually (i.e. 'nowhere but everywhere'). Yet, even without a direct audience, performance disruptions, embarrassment and/or confusion still materialise, with the speaker adopting more defensive practices. With that in mind, the video booth offers a unique platform/context to study 1) how individuals present themselves when referring to LGBT+-related matters in society, and 2) the preventive and corrective practices they employ during the performance. We now turn to an alternative body of literature, IM, that is both goal-oriented and rooted in organisations, and further helps to enrich our understanding of the video recordings.

Impression management

In its simplest form, IM (also known as self-presentation), explains how individuals attempt to control the image others have of them (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). While this early interpretation of IM is still relevant, later definitions focus on more complex processes and relationships between individuals and the organisations they work for. We adopt Roberts' (2005) understanding of IM, which derives from the seminal work of Rosenfeld *et al*. (2002) *Impression Management*, where IM is depicted as 'a new form of social competence in organizations, which individuals employ to master organizational politics, facilitate better working relationships, increase group cohesiveness, avoid offending coworkers, and create a more pleasant organizational climate' (Roberts, 2005, p. 705). To us, this interpretation is useful because it captures the essence of IM as a goal-oriented device to build and, quite

possibly, salvage working relationships. That said, the definition is based on face-to-face interactions. This is true for most scholarship in this field including the two dominant IM models: the two-component model, which focuses on motivations and construction of IM (Leary and Kowalski, 1990), and the cybernetic model, which adds feedback from the environment that helps to refine/shape/alter behaviour in line with the desired impression (Bozeman and Kacmar, 1997; Dubrin, 2011). Both models fail to take into consideration new ways of communicating at work and the extent to which technology has changed how people interact.

Interest in exploring how technology facilitates or constrains IM is increasing. For example, Raghuram (2013) focused on how IM is used during telephone conversations in a call centre, and Kibler *et al*. (2021) analysed business closure statements and the role of IM in presenting failure to the public. In their recent work, McFarland and colleagues (2023, p. 3) argue that 'digital environments are fundamentally different from face-to-face contexts' and propose a contextual framework for understanding IM that extends to online communications. This framework helps to explain why and how IM manifests in different contexts, taking into consideration motivational factors (low to high impression motivation) and the nature of the workplace interaction that shapes impression construction (honest/subtle IM to extreme IM), and as such seems to be more pertinent to the video recordings that form the basis of this paper. Although we are not in a position to verify individual motivations for employing IM during recording, features of the video booth methodology may give rise to IM. This includes the public aspect of the video booth and the lack of anonymity, with the recordings being available online and accessible to high-stakes targets, such as line managers. It is also possible to conclude that a recording may have individual consequences, but only if viewed by people who can identify the contributor.

The type of IM used (self-focused, defensive or other-focused) depends on the nature of the workplace interaction. The video recordings remain accessible and people are identifiable, and evidence shows that this supports subtle rather than extreme impression construction (McFarland *et al*., 2023). These effects may, however, be cushioned by the fact that people had time to craft their messages before the recording. Moreover, they also had the option to re-record. Also, as detailed earlier, the recordings may be viewed by people who do not know the participants, encouraging the use of IM. From this, it may be inferred that IM is likely to play a role in the recorded messages. Partly because of the permanent nature of the recordings, people may have been tempted to use self-focused IM tactics (i.e. making it appear to others that the actor has positive qualities) and/or defensive IM tactics (i.e. responding to perceived threats to one's image), and the absence of anonymity also makes defensive IM tactics more likely. Other-focused tactics (i.e. those directed at others to increase interpersonal attraction) tend to be used when the information involved is verifiable, which is not something that applies to the video booth recordings.

In summary, we maintain that publicly available video-recorded messages do involve a degree of IM. Elsewhere we explain the impact of placing the video booth in an organisational setting and the implicit and explicit pressures to contribute and record a message. Yet individual motivations to do so remain unknown. In this context, IM scholarship helps to explain why features of the video booth methodology invite the use of IM and which tactics people use to present a positive image of themselves – including blaming others, which, we argue, helps to preserve their own positive image. What remains unexplored is how people do this. The video-recorded messages (both verbal and non-verbal) help to address this question. In particular, with insights from Goffman (1959), how a person is perceived to 'be a given kind of person' and the subsequent implications of claiming to be an LGBT+ ally, whether openly or not.

Methodology

Our study of LGBT+ employee networks in the NHS provided insights into how LGBT+ networks operate, who is involved and their aims and influence. To give more people a voice and to document the experiences of staff who identify as LGBT+ and their allies, we designed a video booth and placed it in eight NHS organisations during LGBT+ history month (February) in 2020[3]. The video booth provided the opportunity to record a brief message (maximum 30 seconds), prompted by the following screen instruction: 'Please tell us about your working life. If you have had experiences of LGBT+ networks we would like to hear about those too'. A total of 122 messages were recorded, involving over 130 people. With consent from contributors, individual identities were not disguised, but organisational names and identities were removed. A selection of videos was published on the project website and the full dataset was archived and made available to other researchers. From the outset, we hoped that the video clips would bring experiences alive for audiences and generate conversations about LGBT+ employee networks. Aside from impacts of this kind, we were keen to explore what people were willing to share in front of a camera for public view[4].

We assumed that most contributions would come from the LGBT+ communities. This did not turn out to be the case. In fact, the majority did not state their gender and sexual identity (74.16%), with only a fraction openly identified as LGBT+ (16.67%) and the remaining recordings produced by people explicitly identifying as allies (9.17%). Elsewhere we discuss how public visibility limited sharing, particularly of LGBT+ identities. Tagging the video booth to workplace events seemed to boost contributions from allies, professionals, (senior) management and others who simply seized the opportunity to use the video booth. In this

[3] This study received university ethical approval, Health Research Authority approval and site approvals.

[4] For full details of the video booth methodology, including how it was promoted at events, see (authors, year).

article, we focus on their input, using videos where allyship was either explicitly stated or could be inferred (for instance, when they talked about how they supported LGBT+ identifying people and/or when they used the 'us/them' language signalling that they were not LGBT+ people). A full breakdown of the videos and their use is detailed in Table 1. To all intents and purposes, these video contributions were not what we were expecting and, in many cases, did not initially appear to be relevant. However, these same messages continued to haunt us. What follows is a detailed account of our commitment to working with these data and the steps we took to make sense of what appeared on a surface level to be 'empty statements', professional boasting and/or promotion of organisations. As a team, we want to share our story.

Table 1

Videos used to construct composite narratives

	The proud ally	**Corporate scripting**	**Professional/ personal journey**	**Pointing at others**
	Charlie (10 videos)	Sam (27 videos)	Arjun (19 videos)	Beatrix (13 videos)
Allyship stated	10	0	0	1
Allyship inferred	0	27	19	12

First, we divided the recordings according to the three main groups: allies, professionals and (senior) management. The messages were remarkably similar, with significant overlap between the groups, suggesting that the groups were not that different after all. We subsequently considered the recordings on the basis of alternative ways of broadcasting

support and largely dropped the distinction between groups. However, allies both recorded messages that built on their status (as allies) and produced messages that seemed more generic. Senior managers also recorded both generic and specific messages. Next, we considered body language and how people carried themselves on camera, paying close attention to their confidence (e.g. eye contact, pace, hesitations, movement), level of enthusiasm (e.g. pace, passion, sadness) and authenticity (e.g. closeness/distance). This involved watching the videos multiple times to record every movement, however small, and its timing. In several cases, there seemed to be a mismatch between what people said and their body language. For example, positive messages were not delivered with excitement (e.g. wooden/robotic body language) and bold statements were made while appearing restless. Without the videos, we would have missed this point. The pace (fast/slow), the number of incomplete sentences and the actual content of the recorded messages further exposed levels of hesitation, caution, censorship and vigilance when recording messages that would later be made publicly available. All of these factors added to the richness of the data collected.

Having unveiled the apparent mismatch between content (text) and delivery (videos), and the apparent level of tokenism, we faced a major challenge. How were we to engage with these issues when using direct quotes could reveal identities because text could be matched to publicly available videos? We first tried to identify themes and analyse the quotes but soon discovered that we had to either omit the use of specific messages or offer a descriptive as opposed to critical account of what was being said. For example, documenting in- and out-group references ('us' and 'them' language) proved particularly problematic as it exposed speakers who were not active in or heavily engaged with LGBT+ communities. Also, challenging the persistent assumption that LGBT+ people/networks both need and demand support proved impossible. On every occasion, anonymity was at risk. We genuinely believe that the speakers do not mean to be hurtful. Nevertheless, both what they said, and how they

said it, could often be viewed negatively. For this reason, we removed quotes that could be interpreted as hetero/cisgender-normative, hurtful, disingenuous or simply unconnected. This left us with too few messages for meaningful analysis (with 35 videos removed and only 41.67% available for analysis). To resolve the sensitivities around reporting back on these data and the lessons that can be drawn from what people share, regardless of public visibility, we turned to an unconventional way of presenting and analysing data, i.e. composite narratives.

Composite narratives

Johnston et al. (2023, p. 2) define a composite narrative as a 'first-person account that is written as a vignette by using data from multiple participants' interview transcripts to represent a specific aspect of the research findings'. While this definition captures some of the key elements of composite narratives, there is substantial variation in the volume and type of data used to build narratives (e.g. single/multiple methods, small/large sample), how they are presented (e.g. first- or third-person accounts) and the form they take (verbatim phrases, synthesis of events/experiences or a combination of both), coupled with the sources the narratives are verified by (e.g. by participants, co-authors or both) for accuracy and authenticity. Composite narratives are often used to protect individual stories and identities (see, for instance, Biglino *et al*., 2017; McElhinney and Kennedy, 2021). They can be particularly useful when the sample is small and when the risk of identifying people by their professional status is high. Composite narratives are also a great way to capture collective experiences and project participants' voices (Hancock, 2021; Johnston *et al*., 2023; Porter and Byrd, 2023), present complex ideas (Mees-Buss and Welch, 2019) or make sense of different

types of data (see, for example, Biglino *et al*., 2017). As a result, they have been used in clinical and educational settings to generate impact and to appeal to a wider audience base.

Given the skills needed to create effective composite narratives and the overall lack of transparency in how they are produced, this approach is exposed to questioning and criticism. As a research team, we appreciate that our data have a strong performative aspect, bordering on theatre. In addition, our narratives were verified only by the research team, and not by the participants themselves. This raises questions concerning accuracy and interpretation, including where analysis starts and at what point description ends. Scholars such as Biglino *et al*. (2017) and McElhinney and Kennedy (2021) argue that participants play a role in 'reviewing' or 'checking' the narratives for 'truthfulness', 'validity' and 'acceptability' but do not explain the outcome of this or what concessions had to be made to facilitate it. In contrast, Mees-Buss and Welch (2019) and Hancock (2021) appear to rely exclusively on the research team (their expertise and abilities) to stay as close to the source data as possible.

In this section, we detail the processes of building the narratives and describe the decisions that needed to be made along the way. In total, this involved six steps. First, we watched the videos multiple times, paying close attention to and recording both verbal messages and non-verbal cues. Second, we followed Wargo's (2017, p. 565) visual analytic matrix and coded the messages according to the aesthetic, conceptual and narrative dimensions, with a number of subcategories providing more detail on each. Third, we divided the dataset according to the type of performer (LGBT+-identifying, allies professionals, and senior management) and focused on the latter three groups. Fourth, we carried out cross-sectional analysis between the conceptual and narrative dimensions, focusing on the underlying logic of the message (e.g. change, improvement and movement; inclusivity; pride; and supporting others) and narrative type (including confessional; raising the profile of LGBT+ networks; calling for action and change; and management speak and promotion of the

organisation). Fifth, we watched the videos again and used thematic analysis to produce a number of themes including badge/status; organisational pride; value of networks; role and contribution; journey; dos and don'ts; calls for improvement; and empty statements. Finally, we synthesised the number of themes to construct four composite narratives represented by fictional speakers: Charlie, Sam, Arjun and Beatrix.

Each narrative was constructed by combining sentences, parts of sentences and/or specific words/phrases from different messages for each theme. Charlie's narrative was composed from 10 recordings, Sam's from a total of 27, Arjun's from 19, and Beatrix's from 13. Note that content from some videos contributed to more than one narrative style (for example, one video was used to build a narrative for both Charlie and Beatrix). This demonstrates that allies can express multiple narratives at once, reflecting the complex, non-clearcut nature of allyship. The selected texts represented the key messages, word choices and delivery styles of the speakers in these themes. Whenever possible, we followed Mees-Buss and Welch's (2019) approach and used some exact words and phrases (enclosed in quotation marks in the composite narratives below) from the transcripts but we also used paraphrasing to ensure anonymity and/or to maintain the flow of the narrative. We composed both first- and third-person versions, as each has its own strengths. The first-person narratives reflect the format of the video messages as delivered and narrated to the audience, and so they bring the reader closer to the original experience of viewing the recordings. In contrast, the third-person versions provide more detail on body language and our (researcher) observations, including,

for example, a speaker using an incorrect acronym. We present both versions sequentially below.

Voicing support

In this section, we present composite narratives of four fictional characters: Charlie, Sam, Arjun and Beatrix. As discussed above, these characters were carefully constructed from the existing video clips from our video booth. They reveal different ways that individuals expressed their support of the LGBT+ communities and how they presented themselves in front of a camera, both verbally and non-verbally.

Charlie – the proud ally

Video booth format. Hi, my name is Charlie, I am a ward manager at Bayview Acute Trust. I am very 'proud of my status' as an LGBT ally, erm LGBT supporter, and 'I love' working for an organisation that 'actively supports' LBGT staff. The work that the organisation does is in my view 'fabulous'. As an ally I 'think' it is important to have LGBT networks because they help people to have a voice. Networks also 'help' the organisation to improve and to ensure that everybody is 'welcome' in an 'all-inclusive environment'. I noticed a poster about an event, and that's how I 'became aware' of the network. I love how 'visibly inclusive' the organisation is. From my perspective, I am drawn to events that the organisation puts on for 'inclusivity', especially sports events. I take part in them with 'pride'. One of my colleagues took part in the reverse mentoring scheme. He learned 'loads' from it. I am more of a social person and wear the rainbow badge with pride.

Third-person narrative. Charlie is a ward manager at Bayview Acute Trust. She is immensely proud of her 'status' as an LGBT ally and 'loves' working for an organisation that 'actively'

supports LGBT staff. Despite her confidence, enthusiasm and passion, she sometimes gets the acronyms wrong, or lists them in an unusual order, for instance 'LBGT'. Charlie also feels torn between labelling herself as an ally, 'straight ally' or simply 'LGBT supporter' and tends to correct herself to indicate that she is an LGBT supporter at heart. Instead of describing the role of allies and what they do, Charlie turns her attention to the organisation and explains that the work they do is 'fabulous', without specifying why or what makes it so amazing. Like many allies, Charlie is 'aware of the LGBT network' but not involved in their day-to-day operations. All the same, she still 'thinks' networks are important. Mainly because networks give people a voice, but also because, in her view, networks further 'help' the organisation to 'improve' and, in general, ensure that everybody is 'welcome' in an 'all-inclusive environment'. Thanks to the posters dotted around the hospital, Charlie is informed about events organised by the LGBT network. She loves how 'visibly inclusive' the organisation is and is drawn to so-called 'inclusivity' events, particularly sports events which she takes part in with 'pride'. One of her colleagues took part in the reverse mentoring scheme. Apparently he learned 'loads' from it. Charlie, however, is more into socials and wears her rainbow badge with pride.

Sam – corporate scripting

Video booth format. Hello, I don't really know what to say but I have been told to say something about LGBT networks. Erm, my name is Sam. I am the director of operations for Midlands Acute Hospital[5]. I have worked here for 11 years. I find the LGBT network 'very interesting'. The L…G…B…T network has made a huge difference in 'supporting colleagues' and sends a message to patients that 'we are an inclusive organisation'. Erm, my second message is: Staff networks are 'really important' because they signal the way that the

[5] All names, including names of workplaces have been fictionalised.

organisation treats everybody the same that anybody else is treated. Hmm, did I get that right? I didn't prepare anything else, but 'I love how the hospital has got an LGBT network' and what 'we do for equality'. 'Love is love'.

Third-person narrative. Sam is the Director of Operations for Midlands Acute Hospital Trust. She has been working there for 11 years and, as you would expect, is accustomed to the values and means of communication expected of staff. Sam feels she should mention LGBT staff networks but worries about saying the wrong thing. So, to be on the safe side, she has written everything down – word by word. In a robotic fashion, Sam starts reading: The L…G…B…T network has made a huge difference in 'supporting colleagues' and sends a message to patients that 'we are an inclusive organisation'. Sam pauses for a moment, looks up and continues with a bit more enthusiasm. Her body language is still frozen and lacks consistency with her attempt to deliver an upbeat message. Sam recites:

> Staff networks are 'really important' because they signal the way that the organisation treats everybody the same that anybody is treated. Hmm, did I get that right? I didn't prepare anything else, but 'I love how the hospital has got an LGBT network' and what 'we do for equality'.

At this point, she has run out of ideas, and falls back on trusted clichés, such as 'love is love' and 'I want to live in a world where everyone is equal'.

Arjun – professional/personal journey

Video booth format. Hi, I am Arjun. I am the Diversity lead for South Central Community Trust. I have been working here for six years. Um, I work with 'a diverse variety of um,

members of staff', um, some of whom identify as LGBT or LGBT allies, of which we have then been able to establish, um, a staff network together. Erm, it's 'my job' to support them. I 'think' we need to be as 'inclusive' and 'considerate' as we possibly can across all of the 'protected characteristics of our workforce'. Um, 'if staff are happier, then that makes our patients happier and for them to feel supported and safe in the workforce'. My colleagues from, erm, other departments also get involved, like Pete from fleet operations who helped make the 'pride vehicles'. Erm, although I've been doing this job for many years, 'there is still something new to learn every day'. This has been an 'absolute rewarding experience' for me. I'm really 'enjoying getting to know different people', 'hearing different people's experiences' and 'learning how best to support' them. And um actually, I've seen 'amazing changes' in the way we treat people. Um, we've got 'a long way to go', but we've got to 'keep going'.

Third-person narrative. Arjun is the Diversity lead for South Central Community Trust. He has been working there for six years. Speaking quite nervously, Arjun starts by telling us that he works with 'a diverse variety of members of staff' who are LGBT or LGBT allies, and they have been able to establish a staff network together. Then he stresses that it is 'his job' to support these people. He goes on talking cautiously about how he 'thinks' that we need to be as 'inclusive' and 'considerate' as we possibly can across 'all of the protected characteristics of our workforce'. He gives a reason related to the patients, too: 'if staff are happier, then that makes our patients happier and for them to feel supported and safe in the workforce'. Arjun also mentions the work he did with his colleague, Pete, from the fleet operations department, which made the 'pride vehicles'. Although he has been doing this job for many years, Arjun feels that 'there is still something new to learn every day'. Reflecting back on his work experience, Arjun says with more confidence that it has been an 'absolutely rewarding experience' for him. He really 'enjoys' getting to know 'different' people, hearing 'different'

people's experiences, and learning how best to support them. Arjun has also seen 'amazing changes' in the way they treat people. He admits that they still have 'a long way to go', but they have to 'keep going'.

Beatrix – pointing at others

Video booth format. Hi, I have worked with the ambulance service for a long time and, erm, over the years I have 'witnessed' both 'brilliant' things and 'negative' ones. The first thing I would say is that there is a lot of confusion around trans patients. Staff simply don't know 'where to put them and what toilets they can use', which causes upset. 'We need more LGBTQ+ training'. We also don't have enough engagement from senior leaders and funding is lacking. If only we had a 'little budget to play with' we could do so much more. The network has been 'slow to get started'. People are not joining at the rate we were hoping for, so we can't put on events. It's a catch-22, very frustrating. We need to 'get people thinking positively' about how they 'should be treating people'. But people lack confidence, don't ask questions, because what 'worries' you is that 'you don't want to cause offence'. What I would say to you is go for it, 'you have nothing to lose'. 'Don't think you understand without asking'. Talking does help to get the 'big picture'. Hey, and please remember the 'small things' too, such as using 'appropriate language'. 'It's a long battle'. Thank you!

Third-person narrative. This person does not state their name or detail their role, but qualifies what they have to say with the length of their service for the ambulance service. They look directly into the camera but seem frustrated, pressing their lips together, especially when talking about colleagues who don't seem to have the same understanding as them. This becomes particularly apparent when sharing the confusion around trans patients and what toilets they 'can use', as well as the 'upset and confusion this causes for the individual'. First,

they look up, as if searching for answers, then raise their eyebrows and, finally, frown. Colleagues do make mistakes, they lack training and senior managers do not engage much. This person takes the opportunity to point the finger at colleagues, blaming them for being too scared to ask difficult questions – after all, 'they have nothing to lose' by trying to improve their understanding of LGBTQ+ people and issues of concern to them. Yet they don't, because they don't want to make mistakes and get things wrong. The person pauses. Then they finish with a call for action, largely involving other people, money or both. With a smile, they state that they need to 'get people on board' and encourage others to join networks so they can put on more events. They state that more funding is needed, to allow them to do more; finally, blinking and looking directly into the camera, they tell people what they believe ultimately needs doing: treat people with dignity and the respect that 'they need to have'.

Analysing allyship

The input from Charlie, Sam, Arjun and Beatrix reflects the types of recordings submitted by LGBT+ allies using the video booth. Each narrative has been presented in two ways: first in the first person (as delivered in the video booth format); and then in the third person, featuring observations from the research team about the delivery, including the level of intensity (passionate/indifferent), fluency (smooth/hesitant), confidence (use of corrections) and persuasion (convincing/ineffective), and overall body language. To expand the analysis further, we begin by discussing each narrative in turn. We then explore the scope and limits of ally contributions, using key concepts from Goffman and IM to explain how people become allies (in Goffman's terms, being 'a given kind of person', 1959, p. 75) and what devices are used to meet the required standards – or, in other words, how the impression of an ally is established and managed. Given short recording time (max 30 seconds), the video booth captured a portrayal of being 'a given kind of person' (Goffman, 1959, p. 75), much like an

elevator pitch that allowed us to see how individuals presented themselves and their allyship to the (imagined) public.

Charlie exemplifies individuals who expressed pride in their identity as allies. Being a public ally has been reported to have both positive and negative effects. In Charlie's case, she may have benefited from stating her allyship, keeping her heterosexual privilege intact by disassociating herself from being queer (Gershon, 2020; Duhigg *et al*., 2010). The body language of proud allies aligned with what they said, featuring enthusiasm, passion and confidence. To them, being an ally was a 'status'. Most allies were relatively new to their organisations and had not been involved with LGBT+ networks for long. This may explain why they did not automatically list the acronyms in the conventional way, i.e. LGBT, and why they failed to notice. The allies drew on personal and/or familiar experiences, typically involving uplifting and fun examples of supporting LGBT+ communities – for example, taking part in sports events or the rainbow badge scheme. Importantly, their own self and agency infused the performance. Sam's narrative, however, is the polar opposite, lacking in passion, drive and enthusiasm. Accounts like these felt contrived, with expressions largely overshadowed by the organisations. The accounts seemed to have been prepared in advance – scripted and rehearsed – and to cast an (overly) positive light on their employers. To be honest, the delivery did not appear authentic. At best, it seemed robotic and wooden, contradicting and undermining the otherwise upbeat verbal message. Sam and others who relied on corporate scripting to voice their support for LGBT+ communities exercised caution when gesturing in relation to this. As a result, their statements seemed empty, often containing clichés rather than more meaningful content. It is tempting to argue that Sam's contribution is an example of what has been referred to as performative allyship (Kutlaca and Radke, 2023), but without knowing their motivation to become allies, it would be difficult to justify such claims. In addition, several people reflected on their experiences via professional or personal journeys. Arjun's

narrative typifies this, framing support for LGBT+ communities as part of a 'job', explaining what his organisation has done and how this has helped different people. Like a journey, their work was described as unfinished, with further improvements to be made and learning to continue. Compared to Charlie, Arjun seemed less passionate and more nervous when presenting to the camera. The final narrative, that of Beatrix, represents those who used the opportunity to focus on or 'point at others', a common strategy amongst those who become allies of either personal or altruistic reasons (Edwards, 2006; Radke *et al*., 2020). People like Beatrix shared very little about themselves. Many did not introduce themselves or provide any details about their roles. They shared concerns about confused colleagues, who didn't know how to support LGBT+ communities; a lack of resources; and their own frustrations about people not joining LGBT+ networks, about management, or about the organisation. In doing so, they also took the opportunity to call for action to improve matters concerning LGBT+ communities. Their body language matched their mission: decisive and accusatory.

It matters where the narratives were composed. To an extent, the video booth mirrors a theatre with, as Goffman (1959) frames it, front- and back-stage regions where performances (and their rehearsals) take place. When entering the booth, before recording, you can prepare and/or rehearse what you would like to say. This forms part of the back-stage experience, where people can let off steam, but also a place where performances can be fine-tuned. By clicking on the recording button, the performance moves front-stage, and at the end of the recording you are back-stage again (yet physically in the same space). At this point, you can view the recording and decide whether to re-record, submit the recording as it is or delete it. Even though we did not know what happened behind the closed curtain, with the back-stage region being out of reach, the recordings themselves nonetheless revealed important insights into what may have happened back-stage. Not everyone used the booth as a rehearsal space. For example, Charlie's performance of the 'proud ally' seemed quite spontaneous. Her

performance did not appear polished and included rookie mistakes such as getting the acronym LGBT+ 'wrong', and it seemed limited to her own benefits as an ally (pride, honour and taking part in fun activities). In contrast, Sam arrived prepared with a script. Yet, Sam did not give the impression that she had practised her delivery, as she kept her attention firmly on the script, as opposed to putting on an authentic performance. Arjun and Beatrix may have rehearsed their accounts, but this was less obvious, especially given the volume of corrections and hesitations displayed.

The 'outside region', the space that surrounds the video booth (and is neither front nor back-stage), needs to be considered as well (Goffman, 1959). Placing the video booth in an organisational setting at events during LGBT+ history month shaped the performances in profound ways, with corporate jargon sweeping through the narratives. This represents the organisation as a key off-stage factor. Some people seemed more affected by the environment (i.e. the organisation) than others. This was particularly true for Sam, whose performance seemed devoid of individual agency and controlled by corporate scripting suggesting that they felt obliged to present themselves in a corporate way. This, however, does not necessarily mean that Sam's performance was 'fake'. Rather, it shows how standards of conduct shape how individuals express themselves in certain ways (Goffman, 1959). In this professional setting, some narratives remained just that – professional; constructed around their own 'professional' journey, blaming colleagues for being somewhat 'unprofessional' and/or calling for organisational actions to improve matters for LGBT+ colleagues. Interestingly, no one claimed to be an expert, not even those whose role it is to support LGBT+ communities. The narratives of people with this role were based on 'real' examples of progress, status quo or decline, as opposed to the glorified organisational account delivered by Sam.

Yet others, who perform to 'be a given kind of person', seek to command the required attributes and maintain what Goffman (1959, p. 75) refers to as the required 'standard of

conduct and appearance'. We can infer that for people like Charlie, being an ally is a desirable status, an achievement or a destination that fills them with pride. Up to a point, the 'proud ally' narrative had an air of exclusivity, implying that Charlie had been recruited either by the LGBT+ communities or the organisation and was accepted/approved by the community, rather than putting herself forward for the role. Yet the qualities that warranted this reputable status remained unclear. Allies expressed gratitude and acknowledged personal rewards, which, as argued at by others, may have been connected to cementing their heterosexual privilege by avoiding misidentification as queer (Gershon, 2020; Duhigg *et al*., 2010). Meanwhile, more difficult issues were sidestepped, such as how allies support LGBT+ communities and how these communities benefit. Other allies – Sam, Arjun and Beatrix – seemed to exhibit the required attributes in different ways – not by openly labelling themselves as allies, but by explaining the value of networks and how inclusive their organisations are. Unlike (some of) their colleagues, these allies had learned from LGBT+ communities. They further stressed that more needs to be done by senior management and/or the organisations rather than just by allies. Hence, to be an ally, or in Goffman's terms 'be a given kind of person' (1959, p. 75), you need to be grateful to LGBT+ communities (for choosing and accepting you) and to organisations (for doing good for LGBT+ communities). You need to express how much you have learned from LGBT+ communities, and recognise that progress is not linear and that your professional journey has not been straightforward. A lack of progress, confusion and/or resource limitations are down to colleagues, senior management and/or the organisation. Allies are not at fault. All things considered, by expressing gratitude and a level of depreciation ('still learning') and distancing themselves from those who are standing in the way of progress, allies seek respect, and in all likelihood applause, from LGBT+ communities as well as their employers.

Even though the 'setting' itself was fixed (i.e. a custom-made open-top box shaped similar to a passport photo booth, with a single chair inside), the 'personal front' varied

significantly between the four allies, with some relying on what Goffman (1959, p. 22) refers to as ‘stage props’. Given that the recording took place during LGBT+ history month, it is perhaps not surprising that rainbow-themed material such as flags, regalia and/or badges, and in some cases progressive pride flag badges, were used as stage props by almost everyone. However, Sam was the only ally who specifically directed attention to the material, often by showing it and talking about it to camera. This aside, the most informative aspect of the ‘personal front’ of allies was their facial expressions and where they looked, i.e. directly into the camera or away. While some allies spoke directly to the camera (suggesting confidence), others looked away or down (possibly indicating nervousness) and up (when thinking). Their facial expressions varied too, with some showing a range of emotions (with Charlie and Beatrix, for example, smiles, laughter and biting of lips), while others revealed a limited number (Arjun) or next to none (Sam). For the most part, facial expressions and tone of voice were congruent, allowing allies to express a range of emotions, conveying excitement, pride, joy, happiness, frustration and anger. The number of pauses and hesitations was also revealing. These seemed to suggest a level of uneasiness with the topic; possibly pressure by the host or the organisation to speak; or uneasiness at being recorded. We now turn to these aspects in more detail.

It is quite plausible that allies, such as Sam and Arjun, felt pressured to contribute: Sam because she was part of/reporting to senior management, and Arjun because of his role (EDI or HR manager) of supporting LGBT+ communities. Contributions from Charlie and Beatrix may have been driven by other factors, such as a desire to please the event hosts or a genuine desire to share and/or to make their voices heard. While the exact motivations for ally contributions remain a mystery, features of the video booth certainly gave rise to the use of IM and influenced what allies effectively shared. First and foremost, their identities were not disguised and the recordings were to be made publicly available and were also effectively

permanent. In practical terms, this meant that videos could be viewed by participants' managers and/or colleagues (high-stakes individuals), raising the possibility of personal consequences, and, of course, allies have been reported as sensitive to feedback (Grazanka *et al.,* 2015), particularly from LGBT+ communities (Asta and Vacha-Hasse, 2013). However, as a safety measure (part of the ethical protocol), no videos were shared that could threaten the employability of contributors. In addition, organisational identities were either edited out or blurred over, to avoid potential exploitation. Collectively, these elements – public availability, permanence, lack of anonymity and potential access by high-stakes individuals – have been shown to encourage the use of subtle rather than extreme forms of IM (McFarland *et al*., 2023). Although, the effects may be either mitigated by the absence of a direct audience or amplified by an imagined audience of the participant's choosing.

Corrections were rare, and only apparent in Charlie's account, who initially used the term 'LGBT+ ally' but then replaced it with 'LGBT+ supporter'. Given the permanent nature of the recordings and the option to re-record, this is perhaps not surprising. By contrast, hesitations were common and typically manifested in pauses, but also in caveats that people used to soften their points, including 'I think' (used by Charlie and Arjun) or even confessions that they did not know what to say (Sam). Pauses and filler words, such as 'erm' and 'um', were used by all except Charlie, and by some more than others. Sam and Arjun were the most frequent users of filler words and the occasional pause; signalling hesitation, potential nervousness or, as discussed earlier, the importance of delivering a 'professional' front, a form of IM. The only person who did not seem fazed was Beatrix. Her account was delivered with conviction, with very little hesitation and no corrections. She was also the only person who did not share any details about her role nor did she introduce herself, although she qualified her contribution with her length of service. In IM terms, all three types – self-focused, defensive and other-focused (McFarland *et al*., 2023) – occur amongst the allies. For instance,

Charlie focused on herself, bringing attention to the benefits of being an ally. Both Sam and Arjun each used some form of defensive tactics. Sam, for example, used a script to mitigate the risk of being perceived as not interested and uninformed/ignorant. Arjun evaded the threat of being blamed for not doing enough by sharing the struggles that have stood in the way of progress. Beatrix used other-focused IM tactics by concentrating exclusively on colleagues, pointing out where they had gone wrong and offering a solution. Hence, she aimed to build interpersonal relationships by guiding her colleagues.

Even with no direct audience, the ability to present yourself successfully is, as Goffman (1959) argues, still dependent on your capacity to prevent or compensate for disruptions. We have seen how allies use both 'defensive' and 'corrective' practices to keep their image intact, by being overly positive about their ally status (Charlie) or the organisation (Sam), managing expectations of progress (Arjun) and blaming others for lack of progress (Beatrix). In view of this, the scope for *being* an ally seems fairly limited. We have those who are open about their status, who seem to be connected to the LGBT+ network (albeit mostly in limited ways); those who do not agree with how colleagues interact with LGBT+ colleagues; and those whose role it is to support LGBT+ colleagues and senior management, who seem far removed from LGBT+ colleagues yet keen to explain the importance of developing an inclusive environment. Allies, we argue, seem to frame LGBT+ support (to the public and in public) around what they (think they) *should* do, and how they benefit personally and professionally, rather than what they actually do. This mirrors existing scholarship, which is still preoccupied with profiling allies (Burgess and Baunach, 2014; Fingerhut, 2011; Fletcher and Marvell, 2023; Henry *et al*., 2021; Jones and Brewster, 2017; Montgomery and Stewart, 2012; Poteat, 2015; Stotzer, 2009) and their motivations and rewards (Moss *et al*., 2021; Rostosky *et al.*, 2015; Wahlström *et al*., 2018) and offering guidance on how LGBT+ communities should be supported (see, for example, Bell *et al*., 2021), instead of understanding or explaining what allies actually do. In

return, ways of supporting LGBT+ communities are not only limited but also, and equally, prescriptive and conservative, leaving limited scope to challenge hetero- (Rumens, 2016) and cisnormativity (and, if we may add, limited hope of doing so). These accounts might be classified as examples of performative allyship (Kutlaca and Radke, 2023) and normative action (Radke *et al.,* 2020). Without knowing underlying motives for becoming allies, however, this is difficult to substantiate. What we can say is that the motivation to record a message using the video booth seems performative, even in the absence of (immediate) feedback. Until we (LGBT+ communities and scholars) start asking questions about what allies do, ally contributions will remain an untapped or wasted resource.

Discussion

Our findings present a more nuanced and potentially messier picture of ally support than previously reported. For a start, the narrative accounts of ally support do not neatly fit into existing models that compartmentalise allyship as being driven by a single cause, either self-interest (Dang and Joshi, 2023; De Souza and Schmader, 2024; Edwards, 2006; Philips *et al.*, 2024), focusing on relational work (Dang and Joshi, 2023; De Souza and Schmader, 2024; Philips *et al.,* 2024), or organisational support (Dang and Joshi, 2023; De Souza and Schmader, 2024). While our allies seemed mostly driven by self interest either to boost confidence and/or for personal/professional growth, there was also some evidence of interpersonal work from Beatrix who directed her message to other allies and Arjun who detailed the importance of knowing and 'hearing' other people, and indication of organisational work from Sam. Yet, none of the accounts neatly followed a single category and presented elements of other drives. This suggests that ally support is a lot messier than previously stated, and ways of narrating support cannot be neatly compartmentalised.

The importance of continued learning (Bhattacharyya *et al*., 2024) and professional growth of allies has been reported. Our findings underscore this, with allies stating how much they have learned (Charlie), while also recognising they had a 'long way to go' and their learning was ongoing (Arjun). However, details of what they learned were largely missing, as was information about, if and then how learning had been put into use. Interestingly, allies did not seem to view it as their responsibility to pass what they have learned on to others, but instead, regarded this as the responsibility of senior management or the organisation. Also, there was no evidence of self-reflection, their positionality or what role it played in maintaining the status quo (Bhattacharyya *et al*., 2024; Blatt, 2024; Bourke, 2020), only gestures to blame others for limited understanding, poor behaviour and/or attitudes. Of course, this highlights the fact that allyship can be harmful, even if exploring what role you may play in causing harm can be tricky, particularly on camera. We accept that the video booth format may not have helped this kind of sharing and accountability, but the total absence of positionality was noteworthy nevertheless.

Our findings do little to alleviate criticism of allyship for lack of action (Bhattacharyya *et al*., 2024; Blatt, 2024; Bourke, 2020) and for relying on easy symbolic gestures to show support (Blatt, 2024; Bourke, 2020; Philips *et al.,* 2024). Using the video booth to record a message offered a simple way to show support that could be classified as performative. However, labelling these video booth users as 'fair weather allies' (Reason and Broido, 2005) would be a stretch, particularly because information about action is missing and allies might engage in other activities that have the potential to make a change. Moreover, the fact that allies did not share concrete action also means that their sharing tends to be more proactive in nature (Charlie, Sam, Arjun) rather than reactive (Beatrix) because what was being shared demonstrates what needs/should be done regardless of any proximal incidents or biases occurred (De Souza and Schmader, 2024). Nonetheless, LGBT+ individuals were largely seen

in need of support/help, and as a result the accounts reflect 'paternalistic allyship' (Bhattacharyya *et al*., 2024).

Bourke (2020) argues that the ally label can be put on and off like a mask. This suggests that depending on the circumstances, allies may choose to share their identity or not. Given that the audience was unknown yet public, this posed some obvious challenges and dilemmas. Firstly, sharing the ally identity publicly could place their heterosexual privilege at risk as it may potentially contradict heteronormativity (Granzanka *et al*., 2015), but at the same time, it could also keep heterosexual privilege intact (Duhigg *et al*., 2010). Secondly, allies are sensitive to feedback (Asta and Vacha-Hasse, 2013; Grazanka *et al.,* 2015) and by speaking to the public, the stakes seemed high. Yet, without direct or immediate feedback, they were left with no clue regarding how to present themselves in the "right" way for the audience. This created a self presentation dilemma of what being 'a given kind of person' (Goffman, 1959, p. 75), i.e. an ally, means and how to portray it "appropriately". Shall I state my ally identity, or do I leave it to the audience to make their own assumptions and how do I present myself accordingly? Therefore, our study contributes to the allyship literature by highlighting the messiness, dilemmas and sense of ambivalence that allyship presentation can manifest in real lives. This adds to the rather neatly categorised fashion of existing literature (e.g. 'proactive' vs 'reactive', De Souza and Schmader, 2024; 'fragile allies', 'paternalistic allies', or 'accomplice allies', Bhattacharyya *et al*., 2024). Overall, we found that only those who actively engaged with LGBT+ networks seemed to explicitly embrace the ally label (Charlie), potentially because their identity was already known to others, and sharing it placed no risk to their heterosexual privilege. In fact, these allies may indeed find public declaration of their allyship helpful (Duhigg *et al*., 2010), when others may not either want to or see the need for sharing their identity and allyship as being part of their role (Ryan *et al*., 2012).

Conclusion

This article aims to shed light on what LGBT+ allies do and how they express support. Using video booth methodology, we examined how allies present their support publicly. To protect the anonymity of the speakers, we shared our findings in the form of composite narratives involving four fictional characters that showcase different ways of publicly 'broadcasting' support to LGBT+ communities. Their messages demonstrate how (in Goffmanian terms) being an ally (publicly) is presented as an honour, a corporate showcase, a reflective journey or a diversion to others. Allies presented with differing levels of agency, enthusiasm, confidence, spontaneity and self-correction. They further employed self-focused, defensive and/or other-focused IM techniques when delivering their performances (McFarland *et al*., 2023). The presentation of allyship was, nevertheless, limited and the public 'broadcasting' of support to LGBT+ communities through the video booth appears to have been primarily used to celebrate ally identity or the organisations, or to blame colleagues or organisations for lack of progress. The video booth speakers, we argue, maintained 'the standards of conduct and appearance' (Goffman, 1959, p. 75) of being allies (or of what allyship *should* entail), rather than simply sharing with the audience (the viewers) what they actually do. In this regard, the video booth exemplifies other public platforms, events, initiatives, projects or forums for LGBT+ people in a society where the emphasis is placed on managing impressions of what has been achieved, and what is expected, rather than offering a 'true' reflection of the current state of affairs. Our research therefore highlights two key issues. First of all, the scope for presenting allyship publicly, and to the public, is limited. Second, there is a real need to understand what, and how, allies contribute to LGBT+ communities. Future research should further focus on what happens 'back-stage', or behind the curtain, with a view to learning more about the self-presentation and IM of LGBT+ allies, and/or understanding what it is that allies actually do.

Our findings illustrate that performances are shaped by the context and audience, even if an audience is not present during performance. Furthermore, when aided by technology, front, back and off stage performances are neither space bound nor performed sequentially. This, we argue, extends Goffman's work on presentation of self into today's world of technology advancement where the boundaries around front, back and off stage performances become less distinct. For example, we can express ourselves through live social media platforms to a public who are 'nowhere, but everywhere', and where self-presentation is not limited simply to face-to-face interactions. With increasing digitisation, our paper reveals how composite narratives present a viable method to analyse and present publicly available digital data without identifying the contributors. Heralding increased opportunities for analysis of potentially sensitive information and data. Composite narratives make it possible to explore and disseminate 'out of bounds' topics where conventional methods may fail, often for ethical concerns. Nevertheless, using composite narratives is not a panacea solving all ethical challenges, these narratives will always need to be presented, considered and treated with great care.

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