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Bounded Social Media Places

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Abstract

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In this dissertation, I focus on places within social media that facilitate private communication with intended audiences. This includes private messaging, groups and servers within mobile and channel-based messaging services and social media platforms. I label these bounded social media places (BSMPs) and conceptually distinguish them from public elements of social media (PESM), which include algorithmically-controlled content feeds and public groups, profiles, and pages. Through interviews with users of diverse BSMPs ($N=35$) and an experiment on information credibility evaluation ($N=240$), I also empirically examine how people perceive, use, and are impacted by BSMPs. I find that BSMPs are used to communicate with both interpersonal ties and others with shared interests, while PESH are viewed as algorithmically-curated entertainment spaces for passive content consumption. In terms of affordances, BSMPs *discourage* visibility as content is restricted to intended audiences, *encourage* personalization as users believe they receive relevant content from and can send relevant content to specific

individuals or groups, and *encourage* synchronicity as they facilitate continuous conversations. These affordances contribute to BSMPs being viewed as intimate, as conversations within these places feel authentic and similar to face-to-face interactions. These affordances also inform the heuristics people rely upon for information credibility evaluation, resulting in BSMPs being associated with interpersonal trust and familiarity. Combining these interview insights with findings from the experiment reveals that the perceived intimacy of BSMPs explains why some view information shared on BSMPs as more credible. These findings allow me to make multiple contributions to scholarship and practice. First, conceptually distinguishing between BSMPs and PESM clarifies social media scholars' object of study and provides language that can be used in public discourse to highlight that social media consists of *both* BSMPs and PESM, which are associated with different outcomes. Second, highlighting how BSMPs' affordances operate facilitates durable theorizing as scholars can draw on this work when new BSMPs emerge. Third, while scholars have merely described BSMPs as intimate and speculated that this results in users trusting information within these places, I demonstrate that perceived intimacy is the mechanism that explains why people view information shared on BSMPs as credible.

Keywords: social media, affordances, visibility, intimacy, credibility evaluation

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Growing privacy concerns, changes in ownership and policies for platforms like Twitter, and the COVID-19 pandemic are factors that have led to recent media coverage emphasizing significant changes in how social media are viewed and used (Molla, 2021; Roose, 2022). While some have gone as far as to suggest that this is the beginning of the end for social media (Bogost, 2022), more balanced coverage has underscored people's changing preferences and usage habits (Warzel, 2022). One such change is the growing shift toward the use of more private and community-focused spaces on social media such as private chats on mobile messaging services like WhatsApp and WeChat as well as private groups or servers on platforms and services like Facebook and Discord (Sinders, 2022). While mobile messaging services are already used by a vast population around the globe, especially in the Global South, other parts of the world are catching up, with services like WhatsApp and Signal marketing themselves as private, encrypted, and safe spaces to engage in communication (Iyengar, 2022). Furthermore, private servers on services like Discord were earlier associated with specific contexts like online gaming but are now used for a variety of purposes (Johnson & Salter, 2022).

For social media scholars, this signals a shift from an emphasis on networked publics to refracted publics (Abidin, 2021). Whereas networked publics are characterized by socially mediated publicness, wherein visibility is emphasized and the distinction between private and public is complicated (Baym & boyd, 2012), refracted publics are characterized by users avoiding detection from both “non-target human eyeballs and machine vision” (Abidin, 2021, p. 3). To avoid potential negative outcomes associated with visibility like exposure to harassment and surveillance from individuals and institutions (Pearce et al., 2018), these refracted publics often communicate via private chats and groups within mobile messaging services and social

media platforms. Yet, theorizing about these more private spaces has occurred in a piecemeal manner, with scholars focusing on particular mobile messaging services (e.g., Chen et al., 2018; Cruz & Harindranath, 2020) and specific channels like private Facebook groups (e.g., Pruchniewska, 2019). But focusing on particular channels and applications has limited theoretical utility and discourages broader examination of the properties, affordances, and effects of these channels. There is a need to engage in more unified theorizing that helps scholars discuss similarities and differences across these spaces and the outcomes associated with their use. This would also allow for the development of a shared theoretical language that can be applied to both new and old channels that facilitate more private communication, ensuring theoretical durability. Moreover, given both their popularity and specific characteristics, it is important to conceptually distinguish between these private spaces and the typical scholarly understanding of social media platforms. This is because the latter is dominated by a focus on social networking sites (SNSs) and therefore emphasizes how these platforms enable users to publicly connect and interact with each other. As Baulch et al. (2020) note, it is vital to “consider how the increasing tendency to communicate in closed networks or groups is cause for reconceptualising how the public/private divide plays out online” (p. 2). Indeed, much is now known about the more “public” elements of social media and scholars have developed widely applicable concepts like warranting (Walther & Parks, 2002) and context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011), which can be utilized to study how people view others and present themselves to a broad imagined audience on social media. The same is not true for channels that facilitate more private communication with intended audiences. My dissertation addresses this issue as I develop a conceptual definition of these channels and empirically examine their use to facilitate broader theorizing on them.

Conceptually distinguishing between private and public spaces on social media also has implications beyond academic theorizing. Much of the popular discourse surrounding social media emphasizes how algorithms recommend misinformation and content that normalizes idealized lives and body types, leading to major policies being introduced to mitigate the perceived negative impacts of social media, especially for children and teenagers.(Morrison, 2023). Yet, within these policies and popular discourse, the term social media is used to refer to algorithmically-controlled public spaces, with little recognition of the role of more private spaces. This means that the effects of social media are equated with the effects of public spaces; yet, as noted above, people are increasingly using social media to communicate within more private spaces, which are associated with different outcomes. Indeed, as Hall (2023) notes, when scholars and journalists refer to the effects of social media use, they mainly discuss how the consumption of algorithmically-curated and publicly posted content impacts people. The effects of communicating via private messaging through channels like Facebook Messenger or mobile messaging services like WhatsApp are ignored or underplayed. Hall (2023) states that “when algorithm-generated content and private messages become the dominant forms of use, will we learn from our past mistakes and make better distinctions?” (p. 67). It is therefore important to distinguish between private and public spaces on social media.

As I detail in the next section, in this dissertation, I make this distinction between private and public spaces through engaging in definitional work and analyzing empirical data. Furthermore, beyond private messaging, I also include private Facebook groups and private communities within channel-based services like Discord and Slack in my analysis. I do so to present an integrated theoretical understanding of private channels on social media that have shared attributes across a variety of platforms and services.

1.1 Dissertation Preview

This dissertation addresses the need for a broader theoretical and empirical understanding of the properties, affordances, and outcomes associated with more private spaces on social media in a number of ways. In this section I provide an outline of the dissertation, including the literature and theoretical frameworks I draw on as well as a brief preview of my empirical findings.

In the next chapter, I situate these private spaces in relation to existing definitions of social media platforms and classify them as *bounded social media places* (BSMPs). BSMPs enable users to restrict who they interact with through mechanisms like administrator control over groups, requiring information like phone numbers (for private chats on services like WhatsApp) or answers to screening questions (for private Facebook groups), or being able to filter private messages by known or unknown contacts (for channels like Facebook Messenger or Instagram Direct). Even though users can also restrict their audience through friend or follower requests in more public spaces on social media, on BSMPs, users have more control due to these mechanisms. Furthermore, on BSMPs, content is also not publicly searchable and accessible to unintended and broad audiences. It is typically presented in chronological order in the form of an ongoing chat or thread, which is different from public elements of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, which include feeds containing content from direct connections, indirect connections, “liked” pages, and trending accounts, with algorithms often deciding what is shown to users. Thus, BSMPs are characterized by 1) a high degree of control over visibility, 2) low levels of searchability, and 3) content typically, though not always, presented in the form of a chronological chat or thread rather than an algorithmically-controlled “newsfeed” or “For You” page.

In addition to engaging in this definitional work and outlining what BSMPs are, I empirically examine how people perceive, use, and are impacted by BSMPs through in-depth interviews with users of diverse BSMPs. Methodological details associated with these interviews are provided in Chapter 5. I draw on my definition of BSMPs and ask interview participants about their general perceptions of the BSMPs they use, their purposes for using them, and how they view them in comparison to more public spaces on social media. As I discuss in Chapter 2, this is because social media use cannot be understood by just focusing on specific platforms, services or channels. In today's complex media environment, users often navigate between multiple platforms, services and channels, viewing them in comparison to each other (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Bode & Vraga, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2019). Studies have also found that many people use multiple BSMPs (Xu, 2022). My interview findings, which are detailed in Chapter 6, demonstrate that people use a variety of BSMPs to directly engage with interpersonal ties and/or people with shared interests or hobbies, while more public elements of social media are viewed as algorithmically-curated entertainment spaces for passive consumption of content. In addition to providing an insight into how different BSMPs are perceived and used, these findings demonstrate that much of the early scholarship on SNSs does not explain people's current experience of using public elements of social media. This is because early work on SNSs focused on how people used these sites to publicly interact with close and weak ties through actions like posting on each other's walls or updating one's relationship status. However, public spaces on social media are now associated with consuming algorithmically-curated content from influencers and public figures.

I also examine the affordances associated with BSMPs through the aforementioned interviews. As I detail in Chapter 3, affordances are actions made possible by a technology

within a specific context (Evans et al., 2017). Adopting an affordances perspective can resolve the issue of disjointed theorizing on BSMPs as it allows for theoretical durability (Fox & McEwan, 2017). This is because even if new channels that can be classified as BSMPs emerge in the future, they are likely to be associated with similar affordances as existing BSMPs and can therefore be understood through this lens. Furthermore, using an affordances perspective allows scholars to engage in platform-agnostic theorizing rather than focusing on specific platforms or services that may change over time (Evans et al., 2017; van Raemdonck & Pierson, 2022). Thus, drawing on Davis's (2020) mechanisms and conditions framework for affordances, I identify *how* and *for whom* and *under what circumstances* BSMPs afford visibility, synchronicity, and personalization. The interview findings, which are detailed in Chapter 6, reveal that BSMPs *discourage* visibility as content on BSMPs is restricted to intended audiences. This perception among users of BSMPs is informed by both technological features and mechanisms like administrator control over membership as well as more social and relational aspects like the level of trust people have in their audience on BSMPs, which mainly consists of interpersonal ties and those with shared interests. BSMPs also *encourage* personalization, which refers to the extent to which people believe that they receive content tailored to their interests (receiver-oriented personalization) and are able to send tailored content to specific individuals or groups (sender-oriented personalization). The interviews reveal that BSMPs allow users to receive relevant content from and send relevant content to others, without any algorithmic interference. The nature of the audience they interact with and the level of control and personal agency they have over curating this audience contribute to this belief among users of BSMPs. Finally, BSMPs *encourage* synchronicity as relational norms and expectations as well as technical features facilitate continuous conversations. Through examining *how* and *for whom* and *under what*

circumstances the affordances of BSMPs operate, I am able to illuminate how technological features and mechanisms as well as social and relational factors impact how BSMPs are used and perceived. This also allows me to develop a shared and durable theoretical language for future scholarship on BSMPs.

As affordances mediate the link between technical objects and the outcomes associated with their use (Evans et al., 2017), I also examine how the affordances associated with BSMPs lead to specific outcomes. The first outcome I focus on is the perceived intimacy of BSMPs. As I discuss in Chapter 4, while many scholars contend that specific mobile messaging services or private Facebook groups are perceived as intimate spaces (Archer et al., 2021; Schreiber, 2017; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2018), we know little about *why* they are perceived as intimate, which affordances contribute to this perception, and how this relates to extant conceptualizations of intimacy. The interviews detailed in Chapter 6 reveal that participants view BSMPs as intimate because conversations within these places feel similar to face-to-face interpersonal interactions, echoing computer-mediated communication (CMC) literature on how mediated intimacy is associated with social presence or the realness or salience of a channel (Gunawardena, 1995; Pittman & Reich, 2016). The fact that BSMPs *discourage* visibility is a key aspect that contributes to this perception of intimacy as it leads to people freely expressing themselves rather than engaging in idealized self-presentation. The latter is viewed as inauthentic and is mainly associated with public elements of social media. The absence of content ranking algorithms also informs the view that BSMPs engender social presence and intimacy as people feel that they are interacting with other humans rather than an algorithm. These findings are important because I identify the affordances that lead to BSMPs being perceived as intimate, particularly highlighting the role of the low visibility associated with BSMPs. Furthermore, while much of the research on

social presence and intimacy has focused on the degree to which different mediated channels allow people to express non-verbal cues (Short et al., 1976; Xu & Liao, 2020), my findings demonstrate that the absence of algorithms can also engender social presence and result in users perceiving BSMPs as intimate.

The second outcome I examine is how the affordances associated with BSMPs impact information credibility evaluation. In Chapter 4, I detail extant literature on credibility and argue that it is important for researchers to focus on the heuristics or mental shortcuts people rely on to evaluate the credibility of information on BSMPs as these places are often associated with the spread of misinformation (Pasquetto et al., 2020; Jankowicz & Otis, 2020). The interview findings outlined in Chapter 6 demonstrate that users of BSMPs rely on credibility evaluation heuristics identified in extant literature, namely the reputation, endorsement, identity, and persuasive intent heuristics. However, these heuristics operate differently on BSMPs, informed by the specific affordances associated with these places. My findings suggest that as BSMPs *discourage* visibility, they allow for the development of interpersonal familiarity and trust. The low visibility associated with BSMPs also contributes to a reliance on tacit endorsements as people expect that false information will be corrected or removed. Further, as BSMPs *encourage* personalization, some people believe that they have personal agency over curating a credible information environment. Personalization also contributes to the belief that people are not motivated to share information to persuade others on BSMPs; rather, they are driven by a desire to share information that is relevant to others. These affordances also result in BSMPs being associated with a sense of accountability toward sharing credible information. Overall, a reliance on these heuristics results in many people viewing information shared on BSMPs as more credible than information shared in more public spaces on social media.

To further examine this difference between BSMPs and more public spaces on social media, I conduct a quantitative experiment that is detailed in Chapter 7. This experiment involves manipulating the affordance of visibility and comparing credibility evaluation and perceived intimacy across private and public groups on a fictional social media platform. The quantitative findings reveal that lower visibility leads to higher perceived intimacy, which in turn, leads to higher message credibility. Thus, through a mixed methods approach, I demonstrate that perceived intimacy is the mechanism that explains why people view information shared on BSMPs as credible. This is important because while scholars have speculated that people may view information, including misinformation, on BSMPs as credible because of the intimacy associated with these places (Masip et al., 2021), my dissertation verifies this claim. My findings also demonstrate how both technological features like the lack of algorithmic content ranking and relational aspects like the development of interpersonal familiarity, accountability, and trust with known others contribute to people viewing information shared on BSMPs as credible. This is important because much of the scholarship on information credibility evaluation has focused on how credibility evaluation is an individually-centered process informed by individual cognition, abilities, and motivation (Fogg, 2003; Metzger, 2007). My findings illustrate that credibility evaluation on social media is, in fact, a relational process, informed by the nature of one's relationship with others within a mediated space or place.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I reflect on the limitations of this dissertation, outline how my qualitative and mixed methods findings contribute to scholarship and practice, and present some concluding thoughts regarding the future of BSMPs.

Chapter 2: Defining Bounded Social Media Places

As noted in the previous chapter, there is a need for a more unified theoretical approach to understanding channels that facilitate private online communication because extant research often focuses on specific channels without identifying differences and similarities across them. Moreover, in labeling them as private, much of this scholarship frames these channels as completely distinct from SNSs and other social media platforms; therefore, there is little engagement with existing theorizing on social media. This disjuncture is further complicated by the fact that these channels are often *within* larger social media platforms or services (like direct messaging on Instagram or Twitter or Facebook and private groups on Facebook), making it difficult to disentangle these constitutive elements from the larger platform or service. In this dissertation, I place these disparate elements or channels that facilitate private online communication under one umbrella – bounded social media places (BSMPs) – to facilitate unified theorizing through the identification of common affordances. This requires first engaging in some definitional work and conceptualizing BSMPs. In this chapter, I engage in such work by situating BSMPs in relation to how the ubiquitous and sometimes ambiguously used term *social media platform* is currently defined.

2.1 What are Social Media Platforms?

The label *social media platform* is used in academic scholarship, legal language, as well as in common parlance to refer to a variety of online channels, sites, and services. However, the constituent parts of this label have specific definitions that dictate what is and is not considered a social media platform. This has implications for how such platforms are viewed legally as well as our theoretical understanding of what they are. First, *platforms* are defined as “online sites and services that a) host, organize, and circulate users’ shared content or social interaction for them,

b) without having produced or commissioned (the bulk of) that content, c) built on an infrastructure, beneath that circulation of information, for processing data for customer service, advertising, and profit” (Gillespie, 2018, p. 18). Gillespie also adds a fourth point to this definition, stating that “platforms do, and must, moderate the content and activity of users, using some logistics of detection, review, and enforcement” (p. 21). Although Gillespie (2018) primarily focuses on platforms that facilitate social interactions, he also recognizes that review sites like Yelp and App Stores like Google Play can be ascribed the label of platform. Meanwhile, Burgess (2021) states that platforms are both computational architectures and discursive spaces for expression. She notes that a platform like Facebook can be described as “a proprietary network of applications, data, and advertising” (p. 22).

To understand what makes a platform a social media platform, one can turn to definitions of *social media*. Social media are defined as “Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others.” (Carr & Hayes, 2015, p. 50). Here, it is important to note that Carr and Hayes view social media as an umbrella term that includes but is not limited to social networking sites (SNSs). A SNS “is a networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-level data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site” (Ellison & boyd, 2013, p. 158). As Carr and Hayes note, social media and SNSs often get conflated but not all social media are SNSs. For instance, dating apps like Tinder and discussion forum sites like Reddit are considered

social media but are not classified as SNSs. Yet, our current understanding of social media is dominated by a focus on characteristics of SNSs like user profiles, newsfeeds/streams, and visible social networks (Bayer et al., 2020). Bayer et al. refer to these key components “that users understand, navigate, and engage with regularly” (p. 475) as elements. I argue that much of our current understanding of social media is dominated by a focus on these *public* elements of social media (henceforth referred to as PESM). While these elements have evolved over time, they retain many of the attributes that characterized early iterations of SNSs like posts visible to intended and unintended audiences and publicly accessible and traversable lists of networked connections. As I detail below, like PESM, BSMPs are also a constitutive part of social media; however, they are distinct from PESM in a number of ways (see Figure 1 for examples of BSMPs and PESM).

2.2 Are BSMPs Social Media Platforms?

Overall, based on the definitions of *social media* and *platforms* outlined above, *social media platforms* are viewed as online sites and services that rely on user-generated content and data, facilitate perceived interactivity, and require content moderation. Where do BSMPs fit into this definition? As I outline below, BSMPs exist *within* social media platforms as well as *within* other forms of social media like chat and messaging-based services. They are typically not stand-alone platforms or services. To further clarify what BSMPs are and how they are situated within the broader social media ecology, I outline four types of BSMPs in this section. As there is existing research that focuses on these individual types of BSMPs, by introducing this typology, I seek to draw on all of this scholarship and integrate it to inform how I define BSMPs. Before I do so, it is, however, vital to recognize that these four types are not exhaustive or mutually exclusive. Indeed, a particular BSMP may fit the definition of more than one type. For instance,

Telegram may be viewed as a mobile messaging service *and* a channel-based messaging service, meaning that private Telegram chats and channels represent more than one type of BSMP.

Regardless, I introduce these types to reflect the variety of BSMPs and highlight some of the differences across these places, even as they broadly share similar attributes.

2.2.1 Private Chats Within Mobile Messaging Services

BSMPs include private dyadic or group chats on mobile messaging services. Private dyadic or group chats are chats that require information like phone numbers or administrator approval for participation and cannot be joined via publicly available links. These chats exist within mobile messaging services, which are “applications that allow individuals and groups to exchange text and multimedia messages via their mobile devices” (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2018, p. 1715). These services facilitate the sharing of user-generated content in both one-to-one conversations and multi-sided group chats (Ling & Lai, 2016). Services like WhatsApp and WeChat have also relied on facilitating commercial transactions and communication with businesses to generate revenue (Baulch et al., 2020). Further, many of these services are encrypted, making it difficult for the companies that own them to moderate content, including misinformation, especially through algorithmic and automated moderation (Johns & Cheong, 2021; Resende et al., 2019; Santos & Faure, 2018).

Even as Carr and Hayes provide a broad definition of social media that extends beyond SNSs, they do not clarify whether mobile messaging services are considered social media. I argue that they do fit their definition of social media. First, these are internet-based and facilitate interaction, primarily synchronously, though in most cases, messages can also be viewed later. The degree of difficulty in viewing these messages later differs, depending on the size of the group and how easy it is to search a chat for certain keywords. Second, like other social media,

they derive value from user-generated content and perceived interactivity, albeit in a different way. While their business model does not typically include targeted advertising, a service like WhatsApp, WeChat, iMessage or Telegram would cease to function if people did not view it as a place where they can communicate and share content with each other. Third, these services enable users to interact with narrow and broad audiences. This is the part of the definition that results in a seeming reluctance to classify mobile messaging services as social media since some scholars argue that they do not enable users to broadcast to larger audiences (Bayer et al., 2020). However, while this may have been true of text messaging through SMS, modern mobile messaging services allow users to broadcast content to groups, including large group chats that can be joined through publicly available links (Barbosa & Milan, 2019). Matamoros-Fernández (2020) contends that this group chat functionality is precisely what makes a service like WhatsApp social media as users can connect with close relations as well as participate in large group chats. Similarly, Gursky et al. (2022) refer to mobile messaging services as chat apps and argue that “chat apps are both tools for mass and private communication” (p. 2). Thus, I contend that mobile messaging services enable people to interact with both narrow and broad audiences and should therefore be considered as social media.

Mobile messaging services align with the definition of social media, but can they be considered social media *platforms*? They are online services that host and circulate user-generated content, aligning with part of Gillespie’s (2018) definition for platforms. Yet, Gillespie also notes that platforms process data for advertising and profit and moderate through detecting and reviewing problematic content. As noted above, many of these services are encrypted, making it difficult for companies to collect user data for advertising (though metadata can sometimes be collected) and engage in such content moderation (Johns & Cheong, 2021;

Resende et al., 2019; Santos & Faure, 2018). Furthermore, these are standalone services that are not part of larger social media platforms. This means that mobile messaging services can be included under the social media umbrella but may not be considered platforms. Private one-to-one and group chats *within* mobile messaging services are what I consider BSMPs. These chats cannot be joined via publicly searchable links and are characterized by a high degree of control over visibility as they require information like phone numbers or administrator approval for participation. They are distinct from more public spaces within mobile messaging services like public WhatsApp groups (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021) or public channels on Telegram (Semenzin & Bainotti, 2020), which I consider PESM.

2.2.2 Private Communities Within Channel-based Messaging Services

In addition to private chats within mobile messaging services, another type of BSMP is private communities within channel-based and community-focused messaging services like Discord and Slack (Sinders, 2022). The word channel is used here in a similar way to how the word room was used to describe chatrooms used by online communities in the early 2000s (Johnson & Salter, 2022). It refers to topic or interest-based spaces that allow members of an online community to message each other. Discord, one of the most popular channel-based services, is structured around servers that can contain multiple topic-based channels for synchronous text and voice interaction as well as file sharing (Rietman et al., 2021). Slack operates similarly and is organized around workspaces that contain topic-based channels for collaboration (Teckchandani, 2018). On both Slack and Discord, people can create private communities by setting up servers or workspaces and restricting membership through invite-only links or administrator control over membership. Private communities on these services include topic or interest-based communities as well as communities collaborating on a project. For

example, while Discord is associated with online gaming communities, its use has expanded to various contexts, including teachers setting up private Discord servers to facilitate interactions among students (Johnson & Salter, 2022). A more negative use of private communities on Discord involves extremist groups using them for organizing and coordination (Heslep & Berge, 2021). Meanwhile, Slack is primarily associated with facilitating collaboration in organizational contexts through private workspaces (Azarova et al., 2022; Bunce et al., 2018). The size of these private communities also varies as some can contain hundreds or even thousands of participants (Sinders, 2022). Here, it is important to note that size is not a defining characteristic of BSMPs; regardless of the size of the community, it is considered a BSMP if membership and visibility are restricted. Furthermore, within these communities, administrators can segment people across different private channels and people can engage in private one-to-one and group direct messaging with each other. This messaging occurs within the broader private community and is therefore also considered a BSMP.

In evaluating these channel-based messaging services as social media, it is clear that like mobile messaging services, channel-based services are internet-based, facilitate synchronous interaction (though messages can also be viewed later), rely on user-generated content and perceived interactivity, and enable users to interact with narrow and broad audiences. Thus, they align with the definition of social media. Briefly evaluating them as platforms (Gillespie, 2018), they are online services that host and circulate user-generated content; however, they typically do not involve data collection for advertising and rely on subscriptions for revenue instead. In terms of moderation, they have primarily relied on voluntary community moderation from users (Bajpai et al., 2022; Jiang et al., 2019); however, after it was used to coordinate the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Discord has engaged in company-level moderation by banning

multiple servers hosting extremist content (Allyn, 2021). Thus, channel-based messaging services like Discord and Slack align with the definition of social media but may not necessarily be viewed as social media *platforms*. Private communities *within* these services are what I consider BSMPs. They can be joined through invite-only links or require administrator approval, demonstrating a high degree of control over visibility and low levels of searchability.

2.2.3 Private Messaging Within Social Media Platforms

Within most social media platforms, there are ways to engage in private messaging with other users. As Bayer et al., (2020) note, messaging is a constitutive element of social media platforms. For example, one can send direct messages to individuals and groups on Instagram and Twitter, and this occurs through private channels not visible on one's public feed. This is distinct from platforms like WeChat or LINE, which are considered social media platforms, but the messaging element is their core service (Plantin & De Seta, 2019). Like mobile messaging services, private messaging within social media platforms fit the definition of social media as they rely on users communicating and sharing content with each other. In other words, they are sustained by user-generated content and would cease to function if people stopped interacting with each other. These interactions often happen through near-synchronous or real-time conversations but can also be more asynchronous as messages are archived and can be viewed later. Further, they allow users to interact with narrow audiences through one-to-one and small group chats as well as broader audiences through larger group chats. Here, it is important to note that the audience primarily consists of pre-existing connections on the platform (whether people "follow" or are "friends" with each other), with messages from unknown contacts filtered out. Thus, like mobile messaging services, these can be classified as social media, based on the Carr and Hayes (2015) definition outlined above.

However, private messaging within social media platforms cannot be classified as platforms on their own; rather, they are communication channels *within* social media platforms (Navon & Noy, 2021). As noted above, the term platform is used to describe broader computational architectures and discursive spaces characterized by the circulation of content as well as infrastructures for data collection and advertising. Private messaging are constitutive elements embedded *within* such broader platforms. I therefore classify private messaging *within* social media platforms as BSMPs. They are not visible on users' public feeds and are restricted to pre-existing connections on social media platforms, indicating low levels of visibility and searchability.

2.2.4 Facebook Private Visible and Private Hidden Groups

Private visible and private hidden groups on Facebook are another type of BSMP that exists *within* a larger platform. Groups on Facebook facilitate discussion, content sharing, information exchange, and coordination. Individuals can join neighborhood groups, groups for exchange of support and resources related to medical conditions, and groups created to facilitate coordination among existing collectives and communities like groups for local sports teams or a church youth group. As of this writing in May 2023, some groups are “public” in that anyone can see the list of members (for example, a stranger can see that a user joined an alcoholics anonymous group), while other groups are more private, such as private visible or closed groups. These groups can only be joined after approval from an administrator and often require potential members to answer certain screening questions (Malinen, 2021; Pruchniewska, 2019). For example, neighborhood private groups may include screening questions asking potential members to specify their address or cross streets. Or an ADHD support group may have questions on if potential members suspect or have been formally diagnosed with ADHD. Unlike

public groups, the content within these groups is not visible to non-members. There are also “secret” or “private hidden” groups that similarly require administrator approval. These have an added layer of privacy as they are hidden from search results. So, unlike a “private visible” group that anyone could find from a search such as “alcoholics in Seattle,” and hypothetically attempt to join, a “secret” or “private hidden” group does not appear in such a search. A user must be invited by an existing group member in order to join. This low visibility and searchability is what sets private visible and private hidden groups apart from groups on forums like Reddit, which are publicly accessible and visible, even if Reddit does allow for greater anonymity. While it is technically possible to make a subreddit private, the norm is that subreddits are publicly searchable and visible (Leavitt & Robinson, 2017; Proferes et al., 2021). In comparison, posts within private visible or private hidden Facebook groups are not visible to non-members.

Like private messaging, these groups are constitutive elements *within* Facebook. Thus, they fit the definition of social media as they depend on users interacting and sharing content both synchronously and asynchronously, depending on the norms of the group. Further, they enable users to interact with narrow and broad audiences, based on the size of the group. Again, like other BSMPs, users do have more control over the makeup of this audience because of mechanisms like requiring administrator approval. However, they cannot be labeled platforms since they are a smaller part of broader platforms. Thus, private visible and private hidden groups *within* Facebook are what I consider BSMPs.

2.2.5 Summary

Overall, private chats within mobile messaging services, private messaging within social media platforms, private communities within channel-based messaging services, and private visible and hidden Facebook groups align with the definition of social media since they facilitate

both real-time and asynchronous interaction and enable people to reach narrow and broad audiences. However, they are not platforms in their own right as they are constitutive elements of platforms and services like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, Discord, and Slack. Furthermore, as they afford a higher degree of control over visibility, lower levels of searchability, and content on them is typically presented chronologically rather than algorithmically, they are distinct from the public constitutive elements of social media. The latter include user profiles/feeds, newsfeeds/streams/For You pages, public groups and pages on Facebook, public communities within channel-based messaging services, and public channels/groups within mobile messaging services. As noted above, research on social media has often focused on these public elements of social media. Yet, social media are evolving and these private constitutive elements are gaining popularity and need to be studied and theorized about in their own right. To facilitate this, I posit that these should be labeled *bounded social media places* (BSMPs).

2.3 What are BSMPs?

Now that I have outlined different types of BSMPs and described how they are situated in relation to extant definitions of social media platforms, it is important to reiterate how I define bounded social media places as well as explicate the constituent parts of this term. I present my definition of BSMPs below:

BSMPs are places *within* broader social media platforms or services.

They are characterized by a high degree of control over visibility as they allow users to restrict who they interact with and who their content is visible to through various mechanisms like administrator control over groups, requiring information like phone numbers or answers to screening questions, or being able to filter private messages by known or unknown contacts. Content posted on BSMPs is usually not searchable and accessible to unintended and broad audiences and is typically presented in chronological order in the form of an ongoing chat or thread rather than an algorithmically controlled feed.

It is also important to highlight why I specifically label these bounded social media places. First, the term *bounded* indicates that users have a high degree of control over the individuals and groups their content is visible to (Swart et al., 2019). Even as many scholars use the term *private* to refer to BSMPs, I use the term *bounded* instead. Private remains notoriously difficult to define, with understandings differing based on one's commitment to a specific theory of privacy (Margulis, 2011). Moreover, private has both social and technological meanings. Using the term bounded allows for the focus to be on how users possess the ability to draw interactional boundaries around the people they are directly connected to - through administrator control, requiring information like phone numbers or answers to screening questions, or a pre-existing online connection. As Karr-Wisniewski et al. (2011) note, "[I]nteractional boundaries limit direct access to oneself" (p.6). Thus, bounded captures the greater control users of BSMPs have over their visibility. The next part of this term is social media. As noted above, these

channels align with Carr and Hayes's (2015) definition of *social media* and can therefore be classified as such. The third part is *places*. Using this word is an intentional choice as I seek to avoid the current practice of interchangeably referring to these as channels, platforms, and spaces. In CMC scholarship, channel is often used to distinguish between different modalities; so, channel would not be a good label for BSMPs as these are typically multimodal. As noted above, platform would also not be suitable. Although the term spaces has been used to describe group chats on mobile messaging services and Facebook groups (see Tenenboim & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2020), I draw on Harrison and Dourish's (1996) notion of place as distinct from space. According to Harrison and Dourish, "a place is a space which is invested with understandings of behavioral appropriateness, cultural expectations, and so forth" (p. 69). The notion of places helps to emphasize that broader social and cultural factors intersect with what the technology makes possible to shape communication within BSMPs (Ling & Lai, 2016; Cruz & Harindranathan, 2020). Thus, I use the term *bounded social media places* to bring together distinct constitutive elements of social media that facilitate private communication.

2.4 Terminology Used in This Dissertation

Since I have discussed multiple terms associated with social media in this chapter, it is important to further clarify this terminology through some examples. For instance, Facebook, as an entity, is considered a *social media platform* and a *social networking site* (SNS). Drawing on Bayer et al. 's (2020) work, an individual's profile and newsfeed as well as public groups and pages on Facebook are what I refer to as *public elements of social media* (PESM). To be sure, attributes of BSMPs are also present on PESH. For example, a user can make their Facebook profile and posts visible to only specific friends. However, as I detail in this dissertation, this line of action is discouraged by how Facebook profiles are set up and controlling visibility requires

that users change multiple privacy settings. Meanwhile, private Facebook groups (visible and hidden) and Facebook Messenger are what I consider *bounded social media places* (BSMPs). They are characterized by a high degree of control over visibility and searchability and content on them is typically, though not always, ranked chronologically rather than algorithmically. The example of Telegram can also help to further clarify this terminology. Telegram falls under the umbrella of both *mobile messaging services* and *social media*. Public channels on Telegram are *PESM*, while private channels as well as private dyadic and group chats are considered *BSMPs*.

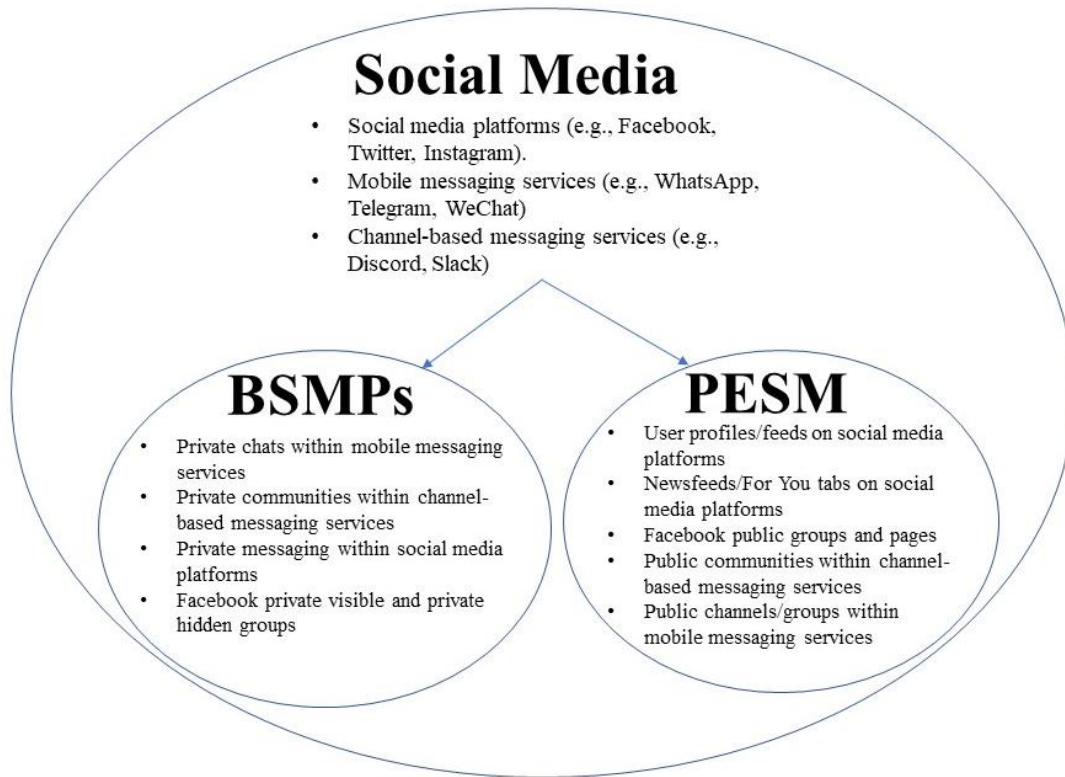
This distinction between BSMPs and PESM serves as an analytical framework to help scholars understand how people experience these constitutive parts of social media differently (see Table 1 and Figure 1 below for further clarification regarding this distinction between BSMPs and PESM).

Table 1*BSMPs and PESM on Facebook and Telegram*

	Visibility Control Mechanism	Not accessible via Public Search	Chronological	BSMP	PESM
Private Facebook group	✓ (screening Qs/admin control)	✓	X	✓	X
Private Chat on Facebook Messenger	✓ (filtering known and unknown contacts)	✓	✓	✓	X
Public Facebook page	X	X	X	X	✓
Facebook Newsfeed	X (suggested content from any page)	-	X	X	✓
Private Telegram group chat	✓ (invite-only)	✓	✓	✓	X
Public Telegram channel	X	X	✓	X	✓

Figure 1

Examples of BSMPs, PESM and Social Media



2.5 BSMPs Perceptions and Purposes

In this chapter, I have defined BSMPs by situating them in relation to existing definitions and understandings of social media, which as noted above, are dominated by a focus on PESM. However, beyond providing this definition, it is important to empirically examine how users of BSMPs view them, including in comparison to PESM. In this section, I outline how I focus on this aspect through my first research question and detail the scholarship that informs this question.

2.5.1 Comparison Studies on Social Media

Social media scholarship suggests that people typically do not use just one social media platform in isolation; rather, they often navigate between them (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Bode &

Vraga, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2019). Furthermore, they view them in comparison to each other and use them for different purposes. For example, Tandoc et al. (2019a) outline how people navigate multiple social media platforms to fulfill impression management and relationship management gratifications. Their study finds that people use Instagram when they want to present idealized and curated photos and Twitter when they want to share text-based opinions. Similarly, Boczkowski et al. (2018) detail how users view WhatsApp as a multidimensional communication space, Facebook and Instagram as spaces to engage in impression management and idealized self-presentation, Twitter as an informal informational space, and Snapchat as a space for impromptu interaction. Such comparisons are also underscored in studies that specifically compare mobile messaging services like WhatsApp to SNSs like Facebook and Twitter. WhatsApp is viewed as a private and intimate space, while SNSs are perceived as public spaces to interact with weak ties and garner approval (Karapanos et al., 2016; Nouwens et al., 2017). As I argue below, I build on this scholarship and address some of its limitations to examine how BSMPs are viewed in comparison to PESM.

2.5.2 Research Questions

Like other extant research on BSMPs, the comparison studies detailed above focus on specific platforms or services. Furthermore, they examine comparisons at the level of platform or service. However, users may navigate between BSMPs and PESM on the same platform/service or across different platforms/services. For instance, they may compare direct messaging someone on Instagram to publicly posting on their Instagram feed to using private group chats on WhatsApp. For some, a single platform or service may be an ecosystem to communicate with a specific audience, including private communication via BSMPs and public interactions via PESM. Thus, to empirically examine the use of BSMPs, it is important to understand how these

places are more generally viewed in comparison to PESH as well as what drives people to use these different spaces and places on social media. Through in-depth interviews with users of BSMPs, I therefore start with addressing the following interrelated research questions:

RQ1a: How do people perceive BSMPs in comparison to PESH?

RQ1b: What are people's purposes for using BSMPs compared to PESH?

Beyond gaining this general understanding of how people perceive and use BSMPs, I also intend to facilitate consistent and durable theorizing on them. To do so, I draw on an affordances perspective (Evans et al., 2017; Davis, 2020). The utility of this perspective and the affordances associated with BSMPs are outlined in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Affordances

Affordances are actions made possible by an object and are understood through examining the dynamic relationship between technological objects and users within a particular context (Evans et al., 2017). As Davis (2020) notes in her extensive review of the affordances literature, Ecological psychologist James Gibson's (1979) initial conceptualization of affordances emphasized the role of the materiality of objects, while Don Norman's (1988) conceptualization, which was situated within human-computer interaction (HCI) and design studies, foregrounded the role of user perceptions in informing the action possibilities associated with an object. Over time, scholars have highlighted how affordances must be viewed as relational rather than object or subject-centered, dynamic and variable rather than static and binary, and contextually and culturally-situated rather than existing in a vacuum (Davis, 2020; Evans et al., 2017).

Through introducing the mechanisms and conditions framework, Davis (2020) presents an analytical tool informed by this view of affordances. She suggests that rather than asking what an object affords, which often results in a binary conceptualization of affordances, scholars should focus on *how* and *for whom and under what circumstances* objects afford. This involves recognizing that technologies can *request*, *demand*, *allow*, *refuse*, *encourage*, or *discourage* specific lines of action, and can do so differently for different people situated within specific social and cultural contexts. The *encourage*, *discourage*, and *refuse* mechanisms refer to the extent to which technologies accommodate certain lines of action initiated by users. As Davis (2020) notes, "when technologies *encourage*, they make some line of action readily available and easy to execute. When technologies *discourage*, they erect barriers to a line of action. The action may still be available but not readily so" (p. 71). Meanwhile, when technologies *refuse*,

they make a line of action seem impossible. The strength of encouragement, discouragement, or refusal is also shaped by how individuals are situated within broader social structures. As Davis (2020) argues, it is important to examine how “features apply varying levels of pressure on socially situated subjects” (p. 8). Davis’s framework offers theoretical flexibility, underscoring how affordances exist on a continuum and operate in different ways in different contexts, depending on both social and technological factors. This is especially relevant for this dissertation as the strength of encouragement, discouragement or refusal may differ across BSMPs. For instance, even as private chats within mobile messaging services and private Facebook groups fall under the broad umbrella of BSMPs, they are associated with *different* technological features and diverse audiences. Davis’s mechanisms and conditions framework allows me to examine how the same affordance may operate across these places to different degrees.

Before outlining how I apply this framework to understanding the affordances associated with BSMPs, it is important to review how scholars have traditionally utilized the affordances perspective to understand social media use. As I detail below, utilizing the mechanisms and conditions framework for affordances enables me to build on this work as well as address some of its limitations.

3.1 Affordances in Social Media Research

According to a systematic literature review, the affordances approach has been utilized in research examining social media use in a variety of domains, including politics, organizational communication, interpersonal relationships, and education (Ronzhyn et al., 2022). However, there is inconsistency in the application of this approach and scholars have often used it to present new typologies of affordances rather than comparing similar affordances across different

technologies, contexts and domains (Evans et al., 2017). Furthermore, some scholars have used the term affordances to refer to features or outcomes associated with a social media platform.

Despite this trend, two affordances typologies are oft-cited in scholarship on social media, especially SNSs. First, Treem and Leonardi (2013) identify four affordances associated with social media in organizational contexts: visibility, editability, persistence, and association. They describe visibility as the effort required to find content and networks on social media, editability as the ability to craft and edit content on social media, persistence as the accessibility of content after it has been originally published on social media, and association as connections between individuals and between individuals and content on social media. Meanwhile boyd (2010) identifies four affordances associated with SNSs: persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability. Persistence is described similarly to how Treem and Leonardi define it, while the definitions for scalability and searchability are akin to how Treem and Leonardi define visibility. Meanwhile, replicability refers to the duplication of content on SNSs.

While these typologies have helped to facilitate some level of consistent theorizing, social media have evolved and now consist of various elements, including the more public elements that boyd (2010) and Treem and Leonardi (2013) focus on as well as the more private elements that I examine in this dissertation. As Ronzhyn et al. (2022) find in their systematic literature review, an emphasis on the former through studies on Facebook and Twitter continues to dominate social media research (Stoycheff et al., 2017). To be sure, some scholars have also attempted to identify the affordances associated with specific BSMPs. For example, Masip et al. (2021) state that private chats on WhatsApp afford privacy, personalization, replicability, and segmentation. Yeshua-Katz (2021) outlines how private Facebook groups and WhatsApp chats afford visibility, availability, multimediality, surveillance, and synchronicity. Lou et al. (2021)

focus on news consumption on Telegram and state that Telegram affords customizability, accessibility, aesthetics, and simultaneity. For Lou et al., (2021), customizability refers to the ability to personalize one's information environment, accessibility is the degree to which news is accessible to users, aesthetics are associated with the look of the user interface, and simultaneity is the ability to carry out multiple functions in the same app. However, these studies reflect some of the issues associated with extant affordances research on social media. First, privacy and surveillance are examples of outcomes associated with social media use rather than affordances. Meanwhile, aesthetics are design features of a platform, not affordances. As mentioned above, scholars have often mistakenly used the term affordances when referring to features or outcomes (Evans et al., 2017). Second, these studies focus on specific services or platforms rather than BSMPs more generally, limiting broader theorizing. As noted in the previous chapter, there is a need for broader theorizing on BSMPs that extends beyond a specific service or platform (van Raemdonck & Pierson, 2022). Third, these studies focus on *what* social media affords rather than *how* and *for whom* and *under what circumstances* social media affords, underplaying how affordances exist on a continuum and operate differently for different people, based on how they are situated within broader social structures (Davis, 2020).

Thus, to understand BSMPs and their use, I draw on Davis's (2020) mechanisms and conditions framework and not only identify the three main affordances associated with BSMPs, but also reflect on the mechanisms through which they operate within different contexts. I examine how BSMPs *discourage* visibility and *encourage* personalization and synchronicity.

3.2 Affordances of BSMPs

3.2.1 Visibility

At the simplest level, visibility refers to what can be seen or perceived by the sense of sight and is both situated and reciprocal (Thompson, 2000, 2005). Mediated channels remove the spatiotemporal constraints associated with visibility as information and content is visible across time and distance. In terms of visibility as an affordance of social media, it has been defined as “the amount of effort people must expend to locate information” (Treem & Leonardi, 2013, p. 150). However, as noted above, this particular definition seems to primarily align with what boyd (2010) refers to as searchability, described as “the ability to find content” (p. 11). In other words, the focus is on how easy or difficult it is to access information online. Although this may be one aspect of visibility, visibility is a broader and multi-faceted concept. As Flyverbom et al. (2016) note, visibility is a root affordance that facilitates other affordances like searchability as well as association, which refers to “established connections between individuals, between individuals and content, or between an actor and a presentation” (Treem & Leonardi, 2013, p. 162). These affordances are made meaningful due to their link to visibility. For instance, SNSs make people-to-people and people-to-content associations *visible* to a broad audience (Lane et al., 2018).

Building on this idea of visibility as a root affordance and focusing on social media, Pearce et al. (2018) introduce the concept of socially mediated visibility. Drawing on Brighenti’s (2010) conceptualization of visibility, Pearce et al. state that socially mediated visibility is relational, strategic, and outcome-driven. Socially mediated visibility requires both a seer and object and is therefore communicative; it is also strategic, in that people can manipulate it to their own ends by drawing boundaries between what is seen and not seen; and its outcomes are indeterminate, as the consequences of socially mediated visibility can be both harmful and beneficial, depending on individual circumstances and the broader social and cultural context.

Pearce et al. note that what sets socially mediated visibility apart from Thompson's (2000, 2005) conceptualization of mediated visibility is that social media affords editability, persistence, shareability, searchability, and a wider and sometimes unintended audience.

However, in describing socially mediated visibility, Pearce et al.'s (2018) main focus was on SNSs. BSMPs differ from SNSs, which as noted above, are characterized by public interactions and visible social networks and are therefore similar to how PESM are defined. Thus, the strategic, relational, and outcome-driven nature of socially mediated visibility on BSMPs is different to visibility on PESM. First, in its relationality, visibility on BSMPs is primarily associated with interactions between close ties or those with shared goals or interests. For example, studies find that private chats within mobile messaging services facilitate the management of close relationships like friendships and familial ties (Cui, 2016) and private Facebook groups allow people to share knowledge with others about common interests (Pi et al., 2013).

Second, BSMPs *encourage* strategic management of visibility. To be sure, PESM also enable users to draw boundaries around what is and is not visible through privacy settings and similar mechanisms; however, BSMPs make this line of action easier to carry out. BSMPs allow for individuals to draw boundaries by restricting membership within a chat or group to specific audiences (Malinen, 2021; Swart et al., 2019). As Mansour and Francke (2021) note, even as administrators are the ones who possess control over membership within larger community-focused private groups, managing these visibility boundaries is an ongoing collective process that involves all group members as they need to follow the group's privacy norms and only invite new members who align with the group's purpose and identity. Further, unlike PESM, BSMPs *discourage* searchability as they make content hard to access for those who are not part of a

group or chat and therefore visibility is mainly limited to intended rather than unintended audiences. As van Raemdonck and Pierson (2022) note, features like content ranking algorithms make it more likely that content on PESM reaches broad and unintended audiences; on BSMPs, people can restrict the visibility of the content to those who are part of a specific group or chat. This is not to say that content shared within BSMPs can never reach unintended audiences; indeed, one can screenshot conversations and share them elsewhere. However, BSMPs make this line of action harder to carry out. This is because in comparison to PESM, where sharing is made easier through one-click features like “retweet” or “share” buttons (van Raemdonck & Pierson, 2022), screenshotting and sharing content outside of BSMPs involves multiple steps and also risks contravening social norms that deter people from sharing screenshots of private groups (Jaynes, 2020). Meanwhile, when it comes to the visibility of associations, there is a larger degree of variation across BSMPs. The visibility of people-to-people and people-to-content associations is *discouraged* by some BSMPs (Davis, 2020). For example, on WhatsApp, a user’s contact list is not visible to those who interact with them unlike the traversable “friends” or “follower” list on PESM. Similarly, in terms of people-to-content association, when a message is forwarded from one chat to another, the forwarded message does not contain embedded information indicating the identity of the original creator of the message, with some arguing that this facilitates the spread of misinformation (Melo et al., 2019). On the other hand, BSMPs like Facebook Messenger or Instagram Direct Messages *allow* the visibility of such associations since people use their Facebook or Instagram profile to engage in interactions, making their connections to others and content more visible.

Third, due to the differences between PESM and BSMPs highlighted above, the consequences of visibility on BSMPs may differ from the outcomes associated with visibility on

PESM. For example, BSMPs are associated with outcomes like relational maintenance (Cui, 2016; Taipale & Farinosi, 2018; O'Hara et al., 2014), social support exchange (Chan, 2018; Yeshua-Katz, 2021), and facilitating safe and private interactions among marginalized communities (Archer et al., 2021; Pruchniewska, 2019; Younas et al., 2020). On the other hand, visibility on PESH is associated with context collapse (Loh & Walsh, 2021), vulnerability and threats to safety (Toffoletti et al., 2021), and the promotion of products and brands (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017).

Overall, I therefore posit that BSMPs *discourage* socially mediated visibility, despite variations across different BSMPs. As Davis (2020) notes, the discourage mechanism refers to how an object makes a certain line of action more difficult to carry out. Visibility through BSMPs is certainly possible but requires additional effort. As noted above, content can reach unintended audiences through screenshots, but this is more difficult to carry out on BSMPs compared to PESH because of both social and technological reasons. Finally, the discouragement of visibility may operate differently in different contexts. For instance, in authoritarian contexts, BSMPs may discourage visibility to a greater degree since people are motivated to find channels to voice dissent that cannot be accessed by those in power (Duguay, 2016; Pearce et al., 2018; Rega & Medrado, 2021).

3.2.2 Personalization

The affordance of personalization is not consistently defined and operationalized within scholarship on digital media and has varying lay and scholarly meanings. There are two primary areas of conceptualization: one that is receiver-oriented and emphasizes tailoring and another that is oriented toward the sender and underscores directedness.

First, some conceptualizations of personalization focus on how technological systems provide users with tailored recommendations. For instance, Sundar and Marathe (2010) define personalization as “the degree to which the content is tailored by the system to individual tastes” (Sundar & Marathe, 2010, p. 300). Within the context of online news engagement, Kümpel (2021) refers to this as implicit personalization, and describes it as “the idea that platform-specific algorithms infer what the user should be interested in—building on prior interactions (e.g., clicks, reactions) and the behavior of one’s contacts, but also on more general factors such as global user trends, or the timeliness of posts” (p. 4). This idea of system-driven or implicit personalization is not particularly applicable to BSMPs as content is typically presented chronologically rather than algorithmically within these places. In another understanding of receiver-oriented personalization, Kümpel (2021) introduces the concept of explicit personalization, describing it as “instances in which the social media users themselves take action to customize their information environment” (p. 4). This refers to the user-driven tailoring of content and is analogous to Sundar and Marathe’s (2010) definition of customization. According to them, customization refers to how “the user deliberately tailors content by choosing options and/or creating new content” (Sundar & Marathe, 2010, p. 300). On BSMPs, such explicit personalization or customization does occur, albeit not in the same way as Kümpel and Sundar and Marathe describe it, presuming engagement with content itself. On BSMPs, users can customize their information environment through controlling *who* they interact with rather than engaging with specific content. They are able to control their audience and therefore curate and explicitly personalize the people they receive content from. As this audience is typically close ties or people with shared interests, users believe that they receive relevant and personalized content on BSMPs as these audiences are aware of what they are interested in (Lou et al., 2021;

Masip et al., 2021; Kantar Media, 2018). Thus, overall, both system-driven implicit and user-driven explicit personalization are *receiver-oriented* conceptualizations of personalization, wherein the focus is on the extent to which users have control over the content they receive. Explicit receiver-oriented personalization is the conceptualization that is relevant to understanding personalization on BSMPs.

The other common conceptualization of personalization is *sender-oriented*, focusing on users' ability to control who they can send content to. Sender-oriented personalization is linked to the root affordance of visibility, particularly the strategic management of visibility, as it focuses on the extent to which people can control which audiences have access to the content they post. For instance, Fox and McEwan (2017) define personalization as “the ability to direct a message to a specific individual or group” (p. 303). This is also similar to the concept of directedness, which refers to “whether a message is targeted at a particular person or not” (Liu & Kang, 2017, p. 70). BSMPs *encourage* sender-oriented personalization, enabling users to segment their audiences into different groups and one-to-one chats (Kalogeropoulos, 2021; Masip et al., 2021; Mols & Pridmore, 2021; Schreiber, 2017). For example, on mobile messaging services, users can easily create multiple dyadic and group chats, including backchannel groups consisting of a subset of members from larger group chats (Ling & Lai, 2016). Such segmentation is especially fine-grained on channel-based messaging services like Discord and Slack as users can create multiple channels with different audiences *within* existing private servers or workspaces (Rietman et al., 2021; Teckchandani, 2018). Furthermore, across many BSMPs, users can direct messages to specific individuals *within* a chat or group by tagging them through using the @symbol and their username (Zhang & Cranshaw, 2018).

Overall, BSMPs afford users the ability to personalize the audience they interact with; both in terms of sending and receiving content. Both receiver and sender-oriented personalization are underpinned by the root affordance of visibility as they are associated with receiving content from and sending content to intended audiences. This is in contrast to PESM, which are characterized by broad invisible audiences and the potential for context collapse (boyd, 2008; Litt, 2012; Loh & Walsh, 2021; Vitak, 2012). Thus, I contend that BSMPs *encourage* sender and receiver-oriented personalization as they make it easier for users to interact with specific individuals and groups. Once a user is a part of a specific chat or group on BSMPs, they can easily receive content from and send content to this segment of their audience without taking any additional steps. Rather than having to add or remove people from their contact/friend list or change any privacy settings, users can simply open a chat or group to send or receive content. Meanwhile, PESM *discourage* sender and receiver-oriented personalization; it is not impossible, but it requires extra effort in the form of changing privacy settings or creating multiple accounts (Costa, 2018). Unlike BSMPs, users have to take multiple technical and social steps to curate their audience and direct posts to specific people. For example, they may have to change their privacy settings for specific posts, make new or additional accounts, or unfriend/unfollow people, often with ongoing monitoring of who is and is not capable of viewing what they post.

3.2.3 Synchronicity

The affordance of synchronicity is associated with “the timing of message exchange within a given time frame” (Burgoon et al., 2010, p. 347). Synchronous channels allow users to interact with immediate feedback (Fox & McEwan, 2017). Moreover, synchronicity is not just determined by technological features; it is also shaped by social norms and expectations. As

Rettie (2009) states, “[T]he perception of a medium as synchronous reflects socially shaped expectations that the interactants will maintain continuous focused attention and will engage in coordinated interaction for a sustained period” (p. 427). These norms may also differ across relationships as people are more likely to respond quickly to close ties compared to strangers on mediated channels (Dogruel & Schnauber-Stockmann, 2021). Thus, a channel, medium, or in this case, BSMPs, may be perceived as more or less synchronous by users, with this perception informed by the technological features, accepted norms, and audience associated with a mediated space or place.

In terms of BSMPs, research suggests that private chats within mobile messaging services are perceived as near-synchronous (Goh et al., 2019; Ling & Lai, 2016). This refers to how the norm on these chats is for people to respond to messages in a short time frame, meaning that they are viewed as more synchronous than asynchronous. Such near-synchronicity has been found to engender a sense of co-presence with others (Park & Sundar, 2015), but it can also be a hindrance, especially in larger group chats, as it can be difficult to follow conversation threads due to the sheer volume of messages (Yeshua-Katz, 2021). Furthermore, on mobile messaging services, expectations regarding response times are constantly negotiated through changing presence settings, which are the settings that determine whether other users can see if one is online and/or has read a message (Mols & Pridmore, 2021). Compared to mobile messaging, expectations surrounding synchronicity may not be as high on other BSMPs like closed Facebook groups because they are not associated with instantaneous back-and-forth interaction; however, users have been found to post and respond frequently within such groups (Hou et al., 2015).

Given the features, norms, and audiences associated with BSMPs, I posit that these places *encourage* synchronicity. As Davis notes, a technology encourages a certain line of action by making it appealing and easy for users. BSMPs, especially private chats within messaging services, encourage synchronicity through facilitating quick transmission of messages and features like the presence function, which indicates whether a user is online and available for a focused interaction (Nardi et al., 2000). However, the strength of this encouragement varies across BSMPs. BSMPs like private Facebook groups do not have such features and the norms surrounding their use may be distinct and more similar to PESM, which are characterized by disentrainment (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Here, disentrainment refers to how interactants do not need to simultaneously be available to engage in communication. Moreover, the strength of this encouragement may also vary based on contextual factors, since expectations and norms surrounding synchronicity are socially shaped (Dogruel & Schnauber-Stockmann, 2021; Rettie, 2009). Regardless, overall, I argue that BSMPs *encourage* synchronicity.

3.3 Research Question

Based on extant literature, I have therefore identified three affordances associated with BSMPs: visibility, personalization, and synchronicity. Drawing on Davis's (2020) mechanisms and conditions framework, I posit that BSMPs *encourage* synchronicity and personalization, whereas they *discourage* visibility. In this dissertation, through in-depth interviews with users of BSMPs, I examine if this aligns with users' everyday experiences and outline the factors that inform how these affordances operate. Further, Davis (2020) argues that it is also vital to examine "for whom and under what circumstances" objects afford (Davis, 2020, p. 79). Indeed, scholars who focus on affordances have called for understanding them within the context of

situational, cultural, and structural factors (Evans et al., 2017). Thus, I also examine how these affordances operate within different contexts and address the following research question:

RQ2: How do the main affordances of BSMPs operate within different contexts?

Chapter 4: From BSMPs Affordances to Outcomes

Adopting an affordances perspective involves focusing on what explains the link between technological objects and the outcomes associated with their use and therefore helps scholars avoid technological determinism (Evans et al., 2017). Outcomes are “what emerges from the user's interactions with the object” (Evans et al., 2017, p. 39). Scholarship on BSMPs has mainly focused on outcomes without examining which affordances may be contributing to them. For instance, scholars have outlined how mobile messaging services facilitate political talk (Valenzuela et al. 2021; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2018), relational maintenance among families (Cui. 2016; Taipale & Farinosi, 2018) and friends (O’Hara et al., 2014), and social support exchange and coping (Chan, 2018; Yeshua-Katz, 2021). Similarly, research on private Facebook groups has focused on how marginalized communities view these as safe spaces to provide each other support (Archer et al., 2021; Pruchniewska, 2019; Younas et al., 2020).

One of the main outcomes that research on BSMPs focuses on is how users perceive BSMPs as intimate, especially compared to PESH. For example, Archer et al. (2021) describe female-focused private Facebook groups as “intimate spaces” (p. 26), Valeriani and Vaccari (2018) refer to mobile messaging services as “intimate, closed, and controlled environments” (p. 1718), Schreiber (2017) outlines how WhatsApp is viewed as “a secure, intimate space for communication” (p. 150), and Boczkowski et al. (2018) state that there is a “feeling of greater intimacy” associated with Snapchat compared to public elements of platforms like Twitter. Even as these studies refer to different BSMPs as intimate, little attention is paid to how intimacy is conceptualized as well as which affordances associated with BSMPs inform this perception. Essentially, the term intimate or intimacy is frequently applied to BSMPs; however, this is done without consideration of either the vast literature on the concept of intimacy or the mechanisms

and affordances that lead to BSMPs being perceived as intimate. This is problematic because it makes it difficult to situate BSMPs in relation to extant literature on mediated communication and intimacy as well as understand what it is about BSMPs that results in people viewing these places as intimate. Thus, in the next section, I focus on these issues, before discussing how intimacy may be linked to another outcome associated with BSMPs, namely how people evaluate the credibility of information shared within these places.

4.1 Outcome 1: Intimacy

Scholars typically understand intimacy more generally as either “the sharing of one's innermost being, or essence, such as strength and vulnerability, weakness and competence, with another person,” or “the experience of another's wholeness, an awareness of the innermost character of another person” (Hu et al., 2004, no page number). Researchers who focus on intimacy within interpersonal relationships have viewed intimacy as a product of an interpersonal process involving self-disclosure as well as perceived partner responsiveness, which refers to the discloser's perception of the degree to which their relational partner validates and understands their experiences (Laurenceau et al., 1998; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Further, Chambers (2013) notes that even as intimacy was once viewed as inherently linked to family and the reproductive sphere, in late modernity, it is associated with individual agency and relationships beyond the marital and familial sphere, including friendships.

4.1.1 Mediated Channels and Intimacy

This shift in how intimacy is viewed corresponds with the advent of communication technologies and social media since “today's technologically mediated relationships give rise to a new, mediated intimacy which incorporates friendship and reflects the fluid, diverse and informal nature of contemporary personal interactions” (Chambers, 2013, p. 45). Mediated

intimacy therefore refers to how communication technologies and social media facilitate the development of intimacy within interpersonal relationships through making it possible to connect with interpersonal ties across time and distance. Here, it is important to note that in discussing mediated intimacy in the early 2010s, Chambers is primarily referring to early iterations of SNSs, which are similar to PESM, with the presumption of reciprocated friendship ties and public interactions visible to intended and unintended audiences.

More recent scholarship has focused on the link between PESM and intimacy in the current social media landscape, including distinguishing between relational intimacy, which refers to intimacy within an interpersonal dyad, and intimacy at a broader level. For instance, Kaplan (2021) focuses on the latter and introduces the concept of *public intimacy*, which refers to how PESM allow people to perform their interpersonal relationships for third parties. Kaplan notes that on PESM, one has access to not only an individual's own thoughts and beliefs, but also their public interactions with other interpersonal ties through tagged posts and comments. Farci et al. (2017) use the term *networked intimacy* to refer to how Facebook users publicly share content that engenders reciprocity and mutual understanding from friends to maintain intimacy with them. This includes adopting strategies like sharing implicit and cryptic content that only a certain group may understand or leveraging features such as tagging certain friends in their posts and publicly endorsing friends' posts through "likes." In a context-specific understanding of mediated intimacy, scholars who study migrants focus on how technologies like mobile phones enable migrants to foster *transnational intimacy* with family and friends in their homeland (Alinejad, 2019; Parreñas, 2005). Here, there is an emphasis on the affective aspects of intimacy as scholars focus on the emotional aspects of fostering intimacy through mediated channels in relationships between people geographically distant from each other.

The studies outlined above primarily adopt a qualitative approach to understanding intimacy. Scholars have also utilized quantitative methods to examine how mediated channels can impact relational intimacy among interpersonal dyads. These studies compare face-to-face and computer-mediated interactions, finding that the latter are associated with greater relational intimacy. For example, Jiang et al. (2011) find that the link between self-disclosure and intimacy, which is operationalized through the Miller Social Intimacy Scale (Miller & Lefcourt, 1982), is intensified in mediated interactions compared to face-to-face interactions. The same team also compares different mediated channels and measures relational intimacy after each interaction among people in romantic relationships, finding that asynchronous text-based mobile communication engenders a high degree of intimacy (Jiang et al., 2013). Some quantitative studies also focus on the intimacy of *messages* sent via mediated channels. For instance, research comparing private directed messages to public wall posts on Facebook finds that the former are perceived as more intimate (Bazarova, 2012; Liu & Kang, 2017).

So far, I have outlined studies that focus on intimacy at the level of dyadic interpersonal relationships, broader communities or groups, or message content. Yet, as noted above, much of the work that links BSMPs to intimacy underscores how users perceive specific channels like private chats within mobile messaging services or private Facebook groups as intimate. Therefore, it is important to draw on research that considers intimacy at the channel-level and examines the perceived intimacy of different channels. Such research often focuses on the impact of individual psychology on how people view different channels and draws on multiple theoretical perspectives. This includes research that adopts a Uses and Gratifications approach and compares the perceived intimacy of calling and text messaging via mobile phones, finding that people experiencing loneliness view texting as less intimate than calling, while people that

experience anxiety find it more intimate (Reid & Reid, 2007). Researchers have also drawn on attachment theory to understand the perceived intimacy of different communication channels like face-to-face, phone calls, text messages, and email, finding that those with an avoidant attachment orientation perceive channels like face-to-face and phone calls as less intimate (Wardecker et al., 2016). Meanwhile, scholars who focus on social media have drawn on social presence theory to measure the perceived intimacy of different social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter, finding that perceived intimacy mediates the relationship between social media use and loneliness (Pittman, 2017; Pittman & Reich, 2016; Reich & Pittman, 2020). In CMC scholarship, social presence is broadly defined as the “sense of being with another” (Biocca et al., 2023, p. 456), and social presence theory posits that different channels allow for different degrees of salience or realness of the interactants one is communicating with (Short et al., 1976). This theory is relevant to understanding the perceived intimacy of a channel because intimacy is an important dimension of social presence (Gunawardena, 1995).

4.1.2 Affordances and Intimacy

As affordances explain why the use of a technology results in certain outcomes, I draw on the work outlined above and examine how the affordances of BSMPs contribute to these places being perceived as intimate. This link between affordances and intimacy has been studied in relation to PESM, with Chambers (2013) drawing on boyd’s (2010) work regarding how PESM afford persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability. Chambers argues that these affordances allow individuals to form personal networks of friends and these networks are characterized by mediated intimacy.

The affordances associated with BSMPs, however, are distinct from PESM. BSMPs are associated with low visibility and searchability and allow users to draw interactional boundaries to engage in more private communication. The relationship between interactional boundaries, privacy, and intimacy is reflected in extant scholarship on BSMPs, even as these studies may not explicitly focus on affordances. One of the functions of privacy is drawing boundaries around who we communicate with (Zurbriggen et al., 2016). Such boundary setting facilitates trust and intimacy within these boundaries on BSMPs. For example, Alinejad (2019) outlines how the directed communication afforded by messaging applications engenders transnational intimacy among migrants and their loved ones back home. Similarly, Xiong and Liu (2022) detail how privately communicating via WeChat facilitates the maintenance of intimacy within intercultural romantic relationships. Meanwhile, Valeriani and Vaccari (2018) posit that mobile messaging services enable people to direct their messages to intended audiences and clearly defined groups, resulting in them being perceived as private and intimate.

4.1.3 Research Question

Overall, therefore, scholars contend that the privacy and boundary setting associated with BSMPs results in users viewing these places as intimate. Yet, beyond such general observations about why BSMPs are viewed as intimate, little is known about the relationship between the specific affordances of BSMPs and their perceived intimacy. Furthermore, much of the extant literature on BSMPs does not engage with existing conceptualizations of intimacy and how these are reflected in how users make sense of the intimacy associated with BSMPs. This is a missed opportunity as building on existing theorizing on intimacy can help to clarify how the intimacy associated with BSMPs may be distinct from or similar to the intimacy associated with other

mediated channels. Thus, I draw on existing conceptualizations of intimacy, and through my interviews, I address the following research question:

RQ3: How do users make sense of the perceived intimacy associated with BSMPs and how do the main affordances of BSMPs relate to this perception?

Beyond understanding this relationship, I will also focus on how perceived intimacy may be linked to another important outcome associated with BSMPs: information credibility evaluation. Before outlining how I will examine this link, it is important to turn to the vast body of literature on credibility evaluation.

4.2 Outcome 2: Credibility Evaluation

4.2.1 Credibility and its Dimensions

There is no one fixed definition for the concept of credibility. Decades of research on credibility does, however, present the encompassing view that “credibility is the *believability* [italicized in original] of a source or message, which is made up of two primary dimensions: trustworthiness and expertise” (Flanagin & Metzger, 2008, p. 8). Trustworthiness is associated with terms like truthfulness and objectivity while expertise is associated with knowledge and experience (Fogg et al., 2001). While trustworthiness and expertise primarily refer to dimensions associated with the credibility of a source, much of the research on credibility has delineated between source, message, and medium credibility (Metzger et al., 2003). Here, source may refer to an individual or an organization. Meanwhile, analyzing message credibility can involve focusing on the characteristics and structure of content, while media credibility refers to how different media compare to each other in terms of perceived credibility. It is important to note that modern scholarship on credibility draws from Hovland et al.’s (1953) research on persuasion, wherein credibility is a receiver-oriented construct (Metzger, 2007). This is in

contrast to early work on credibility and persuasion from thinkers like Aristotle, where credibility was viewed from the perspective of the speaker attempting to persuade audiences. Thus, the credibility of a source, message, or medium is a measure of an individual's perception of its believability (Newhagen & Nass, 1989).

4.2.2 Theoretical Approaches to Studying Credibility Evaluation

The advent of the internet has increased the complexity of evaluating credibility as it has enhanced the volume of information people encounter and introduced uncertainty regarding the original source and context for a piece of information (Flanagin & Metzger, 2008). To understand this complex process of online information credibility evaluation, scholars have adopted a few different theoretical approaches. Some theoretical frameworks emphasize the iterative nature of the process. For instance, Fritch and Cromwell's (2001) conceptual model suggests that users continually cycle through four criteria while evaluating authority and credibility before they make an overall judgment regarding the information they encounter. They look at aspects associated with the author like their reputation and qualifications, characteristics of the content such as its format and presentation, the reputation of the institution associated with the information, and the overt and covert affiliations of the website. Similarly, Wathen and Burkell (2002) posit that users first evaluate the credibility of the medium based on surface characteristics like appearance and design. If they deem the website credible, they move onto evaluating the source and the message in terms of trustworthiness and expertise. Finally, they also consider how relevant the information is to their needs and motivations. Meanwhile, Hilligoss and Rieh (2008) find that credibility judgements are made on three interrelated levels. First, people have certain perceptions of what credibility means. Second, they rely on certain mental shortcuts or heuristics to judge credibility. This includes heuristics associated with the

medium, the familiarity and reputation of the source, and the design elements associated with the website. Third, they interact with the cues associated with the content itself.

The theoretical models discussed above describe how each user may evaluate credibility by engaging in a systematic and multi-stage process. However, it is also important to note that individual differences may shape this process. This view informs Metzger's (2007) contention that a dual processing model of credibility evaluation provides a more accurate representation of how this process occurs. Drawing on the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and the heuristic-systematic model of information processing (Chaiken, 1987), Metzger (2007) posits that the extent to which people critically evaluate information online depends on their ability and motivation. Here, motivation refers to how important it is for an individual to find credible information on a certain subject. For instance, health-related information is more consequential and therefore may necessitate more critical and cognitively effortful evaluation than entertainment-related information (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Fogg, 2003). Meanwhile, ability refers to people's aptitude in evaluating credibility and depends on aspects like prior knowledge and skills. Thus, according to this model, people with a high level of motivation and ability pay more attention to the information they encounter, rigorously evaluating aspects like its source and accuracy. Meanwhile, those with a lower level of motivation and ability often rely on mental shortcuts or heuristics, including simply looking at surface characteristics that require less cognitive effort. Here, heuristics are broadly defined as "mental generalizations of knowledge based on experiences that provide shortcuts in processing information" (Sundar et al., 2009, p. 4233). Similarly, Fogg's (2003) Prominence-Interpretation Theory (PIT) posits that people with high motivation and ability are likely to pay more attention to various elements of a

website and perceive them as prominent. According to Fogg, these prominent elements then shape a user's interpretation of the credibility of the information on the website.

While the dual processing model distinguishes between highly motivated and skilled people who adopt a systematic and rigorous approach to credibility evaluation and people who rely on more intuitive and less cognitively effortful heuristic approaches, research suggests that the vast majority of internet users fall under the latter category (Bowman & Cohen, 2020; Metzger et al., 2010; Sundar, 2008a; Wirth et al., 2007). Observational studies find that even as individuals may self-report carefully scrutinizing information, they in fact expend minimal cognitive effort while evaluating credibility (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). As Flanagin and Metzger (2007) note, across a series of studies, they found that individuals most regularly perform actions that require the least cognitive effort. In other studies, Flanagin, Metzger, and their co-authors identify six credibility evaluation heuristics or mental shortcuts that people do rely on, noting that these are not mutually exclusive and may also be underpinned by other heuristics (Metzger et al., 2010; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). These include the *reputation heuristic*, where people find information credible if it comes from a familiar and reputed source, the *endorsement heuristic*, associated with the idea that people trust information if others believe it, and the *persuasive intent* heuristic, wherein people are less like to trust information if they believe that it is designed to manipulate or persuade them. These heuristics are underpinned by ones identified in previous credibility research by Chaiken (1987), such as the *liking/agreement heuristic*, where people believe information from sources they like and are familiar with, and the *consensus heuristic*, associated with the idea that consensus implies credibility. Overall, this research suggests that people often rely on multiple mental shortcuts or heuristics to evaluate the credibility of information they encounter online.

Sundar's (2008a) MAIN model outlines the link between technological affordances and such heuristics. Sundar focuses on the affordances of Modality, Agency, Interactivity, and Navigability, suggesting that “each affordance could be seen as a repository of cues, some of which may aid judgments of credibility of the device or site by triggering heuristics about the typical nature of underlying content” (p. 75). Focusing on the agency affordance can help to clarify this relationship between affordances, cues, and heuristics. The agency affordance refers to how different entities may be viewed as the source of a particular piece of information on digital media. For example, if someone encounters a *New York Times* article shared on Twitter by an individual user, they may view the source of the information as the newspaper, the person who shared the article, the social media platform (Twitter), or their own self as they have curated their personal information environment. Sundar contends that when people do view themselves as having personal agency in curating the information they receive, it can trigger the *identity heuristic*, resulting in them viewing the information as credible. This heuristic relates to the agency model of customization, which posits that when users have control over customizing their information environment, it results in them believing that their content gatekeeping choices reflect their personal identity, eventually contributing to them viewing the information they encounter as credible (Sundar, 2008b; Sundar & Marathe, 2010). Meanwhile, if an individual perceives the source as other social media users and relies on cues like the number of shares, likes, or comments on an article, this can trigger the *bandwagon* heuristic, wherein information is viewed as credible because it has been collectively endorsed (Sundar, 2008a).

Sundar's (2008a) focus on collective endorsement while describing the bandwagon heuristic reflects how the credibility evaluation process can be social and involve others. However, many of the theoretical models discussed earlier in this chapter present an

individually-centered view of credibility evaluation. They focus on individual cognition, abilities, and motivations, underplaying how credibility evaluation can be shaped by others, especially those who are in one's social network. This is perhaps an artifact of the time period during which this work was produced as it mainly focuses on how credibility evaluation occurs on websites. However, as is detailed in the next section, the advent of social media has resulted in the credibility evaluation process becoming more social (Metzger et al., 2010).

4.2.3 Credibility Evaluation as a Social Process

Scholarship on credibility evaluation now extends beyond websites and looks at how people evaluate credibility in networked spaces, including on social media. For instance, through focus group discussions, Metzger et al. (2010) find that users rely on the collective judgment of their interpersonal connections while making heuristic judgements regarding the credibility of online information. Meanwhile, Tandoc et al.'s (2018) conceptual framework to understand information authentication on social media similarly highlights the social aspects associated with credibility evaluation. According to this framework, the authentication process occurs in two stages. First, people rely on cues associated with the message and source as well as their own sense of what is authentic to evaluate credibility. Here, authenticity refers to the facticity of the information. If they remain unsure after this initial stage, they engage in active or passive external authentication, wherein they rely on external sources for verification. For example, they may actively solicit the opinion of interpersonal relations or turn to institutional sources like search engines and news websites for verification. However, this process may also be passive. They may incidentally rather than intentionally receive authentication as they believe that an interpersonal tie or a news institution will offer a correction if the information they encounter on social media is inaccurate. Tandoc et al.'s framework therefore demonstrates how the

interpersonal ties that people communicate with on social media play a key role in information credibility evaluation within these networked spaces.

The role of social ties in credibility evaluation is also underscored in credibility research that specifically focuses on PESM. Studies find that the number of followers and recency of posts on Twitter (Westerman et al., 2012; 2014), the endorsement of trusted celebrities on Instagram (Mena et al., 2020), and the interactivity afforded by Facebook (Li & Suh, 2015) can impact credibility evaluations on these platforms. Meanwhile, D'Angelo and van der Heide (2016) contend that the context of a platform, namely the affordances and norms associated with it, influences how information on it is evaluated. This indicates that the credibility evaluation process may differ across social media and is informed by the affordances associated with different spaces and places. In the next section, I focus on how I examine this relationship between affordances and credibility evaluation for BSMPs.

4.2.4 Research Questions

As noted above, the literature on information processing and credibility evaluation suggests that people mainly rely on cognitive heuristics or mental shortcuts to evaluate the credibility of information. Thus, “credibility research can profit by incorporating notions of information evaluation that place more emphasis on the use of cognitive heuristics” (Metzger et al., 2010, p. 417). Much of the research that does focus on these heuristics either looks at online credibility evaluation in general or on specific platforms like SNSs and review aggregator platforms such as Yelp (e.g., van Der Heide & Lim, 2016). My dissertation adds to this literature as I examine the heuristics associated with credibility evaluation on BSMPs. Understanding credibility evaluation on BSMPs is important because their use is linked to the spread of problematic information, including misinformation and disinformation (Pasquetto et al., 2020;

Jankowicz & Otis, 2020). Private chats within mobile messaging services like WeChat, Signal, and Telegram have been linked to the spread of political disinformation campaigns across the globe (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018), private Facebook groups have been used to spread the QAnon conspiracy theory (Wong, 2020), and misinformation circulated through WhatsApp has led to violence in India, Mexico, and Sri Lanka (Banaji et al., 2019; Popken, 2018). Examining how people engage with information on BSMPs, especially how they evaluate the credibility of this information, can help us gain a better understanding of this problem. Thus, through my interviews with users of BSMPs, I address the following research question:

RQ4a: How do users make sense of the heuristics they rely on while evaluating the credibility of information on BSMPs?

It is also important to examine how these heuristics are informed by the affordances associated with BSMPs. As detailed in the previous section, research on PESM indicates that affordances like interactivity and association (between users and content) impact the outcome of credibility evaluation on PESM. Extant literature offers some potential answers to this question about affordances and credibility evaluation within the context of BSMPs. First, in terms of the relationship between synchronicity and credibility evaluation, Burgoon et al. (2010) discover that compared to asynchronous communication, those who engage in synchronous communication with others place a higher degree of trust in them. As noted above, BSMPs, especially private chats on mobile messaging services, *encourage* synchronicity as they enable users to quickly respond to messages presented in chronological order. Further, trust is a crucial dimension of credibility. Thus, users may perceive the information they receive within BSMPs as more credible because the synchronicity associated with BSMPs contributes to enhancing their trust in the information-sharers. Second, personalization can also influence the credibility evaluation

process. For example, both sender and receiver-oriented personalization contribute to WhatsApp being characterized as a “confidence-based context” wherein users are less likely to critically evaluate the credibility of the information they encounter as they are mainly interacting with a small and known audience that they trust (Masip et al., 2021, p. 1067). This also relates to the low levels of visibility associated with BSMPs. The perception that BSMPs *discourage* visibility is linked to this idea that users exercise less caution while evaluating the credibility of the information they receive within this controlled, personal, and intimate environment (Masip et al., 2021, Kantar Media, 2018). Furthermore, BSMPs like private Facebook groups are associated with trust when users perceive that these groups discourage visibility through mechanisms like administrator control over group membership (Moser et al., 2017).

Although these studies offer some preliminary insights, they focus on specific platforms and services. It is important to understand the relationship between affordances and credibility evaluation on BSMPs more generally. Furthermore, since we know that many people rely on heuristics to evaluate the credibility of information online, it is also important to examine how the affordances of BSMPs inform the heuristics users rely on to evaluate information shared within these places. Thus, through my interviews, I also address the following research question:

RQ4b: How are the heuristics users say they rely on to evaluate the credibility of information on BSMPs informed by the main affordances associated with BSMPs?

Chapter 5: Qualitative Study Method

To address RQ1-RQ4, I conducted in-depth interviews ($N=35$) via Zoom with U.S.-based adults who use at least one BSMP regularly. Before outlining the process for conducting and analyzing these interviews, it is important to reflect on my choice of conducting in-depth interviews, including how it aligns with my research questions and object of study as well as the epistemological aspects that underpin this methodological choice.

5.1 Methodological Approach

The increasing use of BSMPs necessitates a methodological shift from a focus on quantitatively analyzing publicly available big datasets of social media content to contextually-grounded analysis of social media users' perceptions and practices (Abidin, 2021; Rossini, 2023). This is because content posted within BSMPs is typically not available to researchers for analysis, requiring them to move “beyond data-centric approaches and focus on the lived-experiences of individuals, families, and communities” (Cruz & Harindranath, 2020, para 1). Qualitative methods like in-depth interviews help scholars examine such lived experiences since they capture “the experiences and lived meanings of the subjects' everyday world” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 11). As qualitative approaches are often underpinned by an interpretive epistemology, they also help to capture the subjectivity associated with how people understand their everyday experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). Rather than focusing on causal relationships, interpretivists emphasize subjective and contextual understandings of phenomena.

The research questions outlined in the previous chapters are directed toward generating such understandings and inform the methodological approach I choose to adopt. As noted above, qualitative interpretive methods like in-depth interviews help researchers understand people's perceptions and practices regarding their everyday use of social media, which is what I focus on

in RQ1. This methodological approach is also suitable for examining how affordances operate in different contexts (RQ2). As Davis (2020) notes, “methods that recognize the subjective nature of epistemology—or ways of knowing—are appropriate for affordance analyses” (p. 107). Indeed, Ronzhyn et al. 's (2022) systematic literature review shows that researchers have used interviews more than any other method for examining social media affordances. In-depth interviews can also facilitate the examination of outcomes associated with affordances, including perceived intimacy (RQ3). As detailed in Chapter 4, RQ3 focuses on how people make sense of their perception of BSMPs as intimate and how this relates to existing conceptualizations of intimacy. This focus on meaning-making informs my choice to address this question through interviews. Finally, as Metzger et al. (2010) contend, qualitative approaches help scholars uncover nuanced and contextually-specific credibility evaluation heuristics (RQ4). As I detail in Chapter 7, I also complement these interpretive insights with causal claims through a quantitative experiment that focuses on information credibility evaluation.

5.2 Recruitment and Sampling

After the university Human Subjects Division deemed this study as exempt, I began to recruit interview participants, using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. I posted a recruitment flyer on my personal social media accounts in which I called for adults residing in the U.S. who use applications and services like WeChat, WhatsApp, and private Facebook groups to participate in Zoom interviews (see Appendix A). The flyer also mentioned that interview participants would receive a \$15 e-gift card as compensation. This flyer was posted publicly on my personal Twitter and Instagram accounts and also distributed among various personal and professional networks through channel-based messaging services like Slack and Discord. Further, the post was shared by my own followers and therefore reached their personal

social networks. Once the interviews began, I also engaged in snowball sampling, asking interview participants to recommend people they know who are users of at least one BSMP. This helped to diversify my sample and broaden the types of BSMPs represented in the sample. As my initial interviews were mainly with participants who identify as women, I asked people to refer participants who identify as men or non-binary to ensure greater heterogeneity and maximize range in the sample (Weiss, 1994). I also asked participants to refer people who use different BSMPs, especially private chats within various mobile messaging services and private communities within different channel-based messaging services. This was also the reason why I oversampled for people belonging to diasporic communities as many such communities are associated with specific BSMPs (Gursky et al., 2021; Khan & Ramachandran, 2021; Zhang et al., 2023). For instance, South Asian and Latin American communities are associated with WhatsApp use, while the Chinese community typically uses WeChat. This enabled me to cover a variety of BSMPs while drawing a definite boundary around the sample. Furthermore, as I focus on credibility evaluation and misinformation, oversampling for immigrant and diasporic communities also addresses calls for more research on the transnational flow of misinformation (Moran et al., 2023).

It is also important to reflect on some of the limitations of my recruitment and sampling strategy. In terms of recruitment, posting the flyer to my personal social media accounts shaped the makeup of the sample due to the homophily associated with one's online social network (Reade, 2021). In other words, the recruitment call likely reached people who share similar characteristics to me, including similar levels of education and technology access and competency. As the flyer was in English and much of my personal social network is primarily English-speaking, this also limited the sample to English-speaking people. As mentioned above,

I tried to address some of these issues through snowball sampling, wherein I asked participants to refer others who would help to diversify the sample in terms of gender identity, ethnicity, and BSMPs used. Regardless, snowball sampling does restrict the sample to specific social networks (Weiss, 1994). Further, while I oversampled for diasporic and immigrant populations, this was not done systematically and therefore only certain immigrant communities are included in the sample. It is also important to recognize the self-selection bias associated with my recruitment and sampling strategy. Interview participants who regularly use BSMPs self-selected into the sample and they may have been predisposed to highlighting the advantages associated with these places. A sample consisting of both users and non-users would potentially present a more diverse range of perspectives on how BSMPs are more broadly perceived. Nonetheless, by having a fairly high wage incentive of \$15, which is close to the minimum hourly wage in my jurisdiction, I may have been able to overcome some of the common limitations of convenience and snowball sampling. Further, focusing on regular users of a variety of BSMPs allows me to engage in broader theorizing on these places.

My final sample consisted of 35 interview participants (see Table 2 for self-described demographic details). It included 21 women, 11 men, and 3 non-binary people. Their ages ranged from 19-76 and the mean age was approximately 38. I interviewed people from diverse professions, including students, homemakers, and corporate professionals. As noted above, I oversampled for people belonging to diasporic and immigrant communities and therefore the final sample included people from Brazilian, Indian, Chinese, Thai, Mexican and Costa Rican backgrounds. Furthermore, across the sample, I interviewed people who use different BSMPs, including private chats on WhatsApp, WeChat, Telegram, Signal, LINE, Kakao Talk, GroupMe,

and Viber, private messaging on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, private servers and workspaces on Discord and Slack, and private and private hidden groups on Facebook.

Table 2

Self-Described Demographic Details for Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Profession
Alfonso	31	Male	Program officer
Allen D. Berger	76	Male	Retired
Amy Allen	32	Woman	Civil engineer
Amy Yang	53	Female	Housewife
Anders	25	Nonbinary, generally male presenting	Research associate
Andrea	39	Female	Parent
Andrew	32	Male	Innovation portfolio manager
Aryan	26	Male	Consultant
Audrey Kaplan	38	Female	Environmental engineer
Becky Thatcher	55	Female	Process engineer
Ben Adams	44	Male	Engineer
Bette Graham	37	Female	Registered nurse
Cesar	26	Male	Software industry
Chamomile	27	FTM transgender	Customer support
Cruz	24	Nonbinary	Research assistant
Daya	69	Female	Homemaker
Diane Johnson	30	Female	Freelance writer
Elise Chen	19	Female	Student
Erica	53	Female	Higher education
Francesca	53	Female	Teacher
Ian	34	Male	Software development
Johny	43	Nonbinary	Electrical engineer
KC	30	Female	Social work
Mallory	38	Female	Librarian
Manaal Singh	25	Female	Student
Matthew	30	Male	Logistics security analyst
May	22	Female	Worker (part-time)
MP Olson	62	Male	Real estate appraiser
Pam	55	Female	Self-employed
Quill	58	Female	Journalist
Ravi	35	Male	Research scientist
Sarah	27	Female	Student
Tiff	25	Female	Graduate student
Xavier	27	Female	Postdoctoral fellow/instructor
Zoe	22	Female	Student

5.3 Interviews

Once participants responded to the flyer and indicated that they were interested in being interviewed, they were sent a Google form containing details about the study and a question asking them to confirm that they consented to being interviewed (see Appendix B for consent form). They were also asked to select a pseudonym for themselves. This was done to engender trust and help them feel like they had agency during the research process (Marzano, 2012). When referring to individual participants, I use pseudonyms throughout this dissertation to protect confidentiality. In addition to this consent form, they were also sent a Google form with questions about their general demographic details and social media use (see Appendix C for pre-interview questions form).

After they had given informed consent and answered the pre-interview questions, participants were interviewed via Zoom. Conducting online interviews enabled me to expand my reach, as I was not geographically limited and could interview people residing across the U.S. However, there are also limitations associated with online interviews, particularly regarding establishing rapport with participants (Reñosa et al., 2021). To address these issues and help participants feel comfortable, I typically engaged in a few minutes of informal conversation with them before I started recording the interview. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted for approximately one hour on average (see Appendix D for full interview protocol). Participants were first asked about their general use of technology to communicate with others and their perceptions regarding the BSMPs they use regularly (RQ1), including whether they associate these places with intimacy (RQ3). For instance, I asked them: “If someone asked you to use an adjective to describe [BSMP they are discussing], what would you use? Tell me more about why.” Next, they were asked questions related to the affordances of BSMPs (RQ2). For

example, in relation to the visibility affordance, they were asked: “What people and other entities do you think have access to the messages and content you post in one-to-one and/or group interactions?” Here, it is important to note that the interview protocol also contains questions related to the affordance of multimediality, which refers to “the multitude of means of expression including images (still or moving), sound (talk, music, and noises), and written text” associated with digital media (Frissen et al., 2015, p. 22). While I initially expected this to be one of the main affordances associated with BSMPs, the first few interviews revealed that participants generally associated all of digital media with multimediality. They did not believe that this affordance operates any differently across different forms of digital and social media, including on BSMPs. Thus, I decided to stop asking participants about this affordance and it was excluded from my analysis. After questions related to affordances, participants were asked about how they engage with news and information on BSMPs and were prompted to walk through their information credibility evaluation process (RQ4). For example, I asked them: “What kind of things do you look for in content that is shared on [the BSMP they are discussing] when you’re considering if it is believable or not?”

During each interview, when relevant, I followed-up with questions on how the experience participants were discussing in relation to BSMPs compared to PESM. It is important to note that participants did often make these comparisons without being prompted, particularly highlighting the role of algorithms on PESM and how that compares to the chronological nature of BSMPs. This demonstrates how PESM continue to occupy a central role in how many people view social media, despite the increased prominence of BSMPs. However, there were times where I did prompt participants to make these comparisons and therefore there is a danger that this distinction between BSMPs and PESM was influenced by the researcher’s prompting and

not fully representative of the participants' beliefs. With interviews and any method that relies on self-reports of behavior, there is also the issue of a gap between what participants self-report and their actual behavior (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014). While this remains a limitation of such methods, especially in relation to BSMPs, where researchers usually do not have direct access to content posted by users, it can be mitigated through asking participants to provide specific examples of the phenomena they are discussing (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I made best efforts to prompt participants to provide such examples, including encouraging them to scroll through their chats and groups to look for these examples (Robards & Lincoln, 2019). Scrolling through can elicit the emotions participants actually experience in their daily technology use, facilitating more authentic responses compared to simple verbal recollections (Pink et al., 2016).

5.4 Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using an automated transcription service. These transcripts were checked for errors to ensure that the final transcripts used for analysis were accurate. Quotes included in this dissertation have been lightly edited from the original transcripts for clarity. The transcripts were then analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In conducting thematic analysis, I followed Braun and Clarke's six suggested steps and: 1) read the data multiple times to gain familiarity with it, 2) took notes and generated initial themes based on my research questions, 3) combined these initial themes into broader themes, 4) reviewed both overarching supra-themes and lower-level themes to ensure that they answered my research questions, 5) named the themes, and 6) chose suitable exemplars from within the data to represent each theme.

Further, while identifying these themes, I conducted a theoretically-driven thematic analysis informed by the theoretical perspectives detailed in Chapter, 2, 3, and 4. Thus, for RQ1,

I drew on extant literature on how users view social media platforms and elements in comparison to each other (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2019). For RQ2, I was guided by Davis's (2020) mechanisms and conditions framework for affordances as well as existing conceptualizations of visibility, personalization, and synchronicity. When identifying excerpts associated with visibility, I drew on Pearce et al.'s (2018) conceptualization of socially mediated visibility. For personalization, I was guided by Kümpel's (2021) distinction between implicit and explicit receiver-oriented personalization as well as Fox and McEwan's (2017) conceptualization of sender-oriented personalization. For synchronicity, I drew on Rettie's (2009) work on how both technological features and social expectations and norms contribute to a channel being viewed as synchronous. For RQ3, I identified excerpts that echo existing conceptualization of intimacy. In particular, I was guided by work from Hu et al. (2004), Chambers (2013), and Pittman and Reich (2016) that highlights how intimacy is associated with social presence and experiencing someone's wholeness and innermost being. Finally, for RQ4, I drew on existing typologies of information credibility evaluation heuristics (Chaiken, 1987; Metzger et al., 2010; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013).

I chose to conduct this theoretically-driven thematic analysis because I seek to facilitate consistent and durable theorizing on BSMPs by utilizing the affordances framework (Evans et al., 2017; Fox & McEwan, 2017). Methods like inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1968) were therefore not suitable as they are geared toward generating new theories and frameworks. To be sure, conducting a theoretically-driven thematic analysis does not preclude identifying emergent findings and themes that differ from, or even contradict, existing scholarship. For example, while addressing RQ4, I identified an emergent information credibility evaluation heuristic that has not been

discussed in extant credibility literature. As I discuss in detail in the next chapter, I labeled it the accountability heuristic. Yet, it is also important to acknowledge that by approaching interviews with an existing theoretical framework in mind, I may have steered participants toward discussing certain aspects associated with BSMPs, potentially inhibiting the emergence of surprising and divergent findings.

To ensure that this analysis is trustworthy and accurately reflects the interview data I collected, I also engaged in data verification through peer debriefing and keeping an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing involved sharing a subset of the data and all of the identified themes with a qualitatively trained researcher. This researcher evaluated the extent to which the themes accurately reflect the data. We then engaged in a discussion and came to a consensus regarding the final themes included in the dissertation. Meanwhile, maintaining the audit trail involved taking detailed notes throughout the analysis process.

5.5 Reflexivity and Positionality

Self-reflexivity is considered an important practice at all stages of the qualitative research process and is described as “the careful consideration of the ways in which researchers’ past experiences, points of view, and roles impact these same researchers’ interactions with, and interpretations of, the research scene” (Tracy, 2019, p. 2). Scholars who adopt an interpretive qualitative approach recognize that their values and identity play a role in producing reality through knowledge production (Anderson, 1996). The researcher’s positionality can impact their level of access to research participants, how much participants open up to them, and how they interpret and present their findings (Berger, 2015). My own position as a cis-gendered straight man who moved to the United States from India to pursue a doctoral degree therefore informed

all of these aspects during the research process. In this section, I discuss the aspects where my positionality with respect to my research participants was particularly salient.

As noted above, I oversampled for people belonging to diasporic and immigrant communities. While this was informed by the goal of covering a variety of BSMPs, I was also driven by the desire to have a more inclusive sample. However, this does not mean that I draw simplistic binaries between those in my sample who are part of these communities and everyone else. Instead, I draw on existing scholarship on the internationalization of communication and media scholarship, avoiding essentialism and the construction of false binaries, and am “guided by a hybrid, dynamic, and open vision of academic knowledge” (Waisbord, 2019, p. 105).

During all of my interviews, my positionality also informed whether I was considered an insider or an outsider to the participants. Scholars have reflected on how this insider-outsider divide is relational and subjective, especially when it comes to studying migrant populations (Carling et al., 2014). Walker (2021) uses the metaphor of the equator, emphasizing how researchers constantly straddle the line between being considered an insider or an outsider. Throughout my interviews, there were times where I occupied the insider status, as participants viewed me as someone who was similarly from outside of the U.S. At the same time, some likely saw me as different to them because of my background, educational status, and how long I have lived in the U.S. This may have particularly been the case for many of the American-born participants I interviewed. While rapport-building can sometimes be difficult in such cases, there are also advantages associated with being considered an outsider (Berger, 2015). For example, participants felt the need to explicitly clarify culture and context-specific issues during the interviews since they were unsure of my own knowledge of these issues. Meanwhile, when the researcher occupies the insider status, there is a danger that people assume an implicit shared

understanding and do not underscore these issues in their responses. This was especially the case when I interviewed participants from an Indian background, resulting in me having to ask them multiple follow-up questions. For example, when they discussed receiving forwards on extended family group chats, I asked them to elaborate on the dynamics of these group chats and what the term “forwards” means within this specific context.

As the focus of this dissertation is understanding how people communicate in mediated places that are not publicly accessible, many interview participants spoke about being in private groups and chats centered on sensitive and challenging issues that impact marginalized populations, including LGBTQIA+ identity, infertility, and mental health-related topics. As I discuss in the next chapter, such participants value the low visibility associated with BSMPs as it allows them to engage in discussions about these issues in a safe and intimate place. This indicates that researchers who focus on BSMPs need to ensure that their methodological approach is considerate and protective of marginalized populations and their expectations regarding privacy on BSMPs. When such sensitive and challenging topics came up during my interviews, I emphasized to participants that they did not need to reveal anything that they wanted to keep private. Moreover, as I lack personal experience with some of these issues, in representing their accounts, I have made best efforts to give voice to these participants. Despite these efforts, it is important to recognize that interpretive researchers often negotiate a balance between giving voice to participants by descriptively recounting what they say and engaging in interpretation and meaning-making (Larkin et al., 2006). Thus, even as I have attempted to engage in reflexivity throughout the research process, my final interpretation and analysis of the participants’ accounts is undoubtedly informed by my own values, experiences, and biases.

Chapter 6: Qualitative Study Findings

6.1 RQ1: Perceptions and Purposes of BSMPs

To address RQ1, I focus on how BSMPs are generally perceived, the purposes they are used for, and how this compares to PESM. The interviews reveal that the perceived advantages of using BSMPs and disadvantages of using PESM have led to people increasingly communicating with interpersonal ties and/or others with shared interests on a variety of BSMPs. In comparison, PESM are mainly associated with passively consuming algorithmically curated content for entertainment purposes.

6.1.1 *Shift Toward BSMPs*

People are increasingly using BSMPs, especially compared to PESM, according to the participants. For some participants, the reason for this turn toward BSMPs is the negativity and conflict associated with more public online spaces. As Chamomile noted:

A lot of people are doing what I did, where they stop using public social media as much and spend most of their time in a more private setting, because they had bad experiences or just anxiety and stress and negativity on Twitter. So, I think people are shifting more towards a medium sized community versus the whole internet.

Becky also hinted at this while describing how viewing political content she does not agree with has led to her using BSMPs more. She said that “I have started leaning more into the closed groups rather than just posting on my wall” on Facebook because “the politics started turning me off.” Experiences like Chamomile’s and Becky’s are not unique as studies have found that people look to avoid certain weak ties on PESM, especially those with divergent political opinions, instead opting to build “digital ‘safe spaces’” (Zhu & Skoric, 2021, p. 892). The participants indicated that BSMPs represent such safe spaces.

This shift away from more public social media has also happened because BSMPs facilitate social interactions, while PESM are no longer associated with such interactions, according to participants like Cesar:

I miss social media being social. I think that's the nugget of it. I really wish that there was more ability for me to make friends and engage in smaller spaces with strangers. And I think that group chats are the closest thing to that. And Discord servers are the closest thing to that. I hear a lot of people making friends over Discord and not really so much over Twitter.

Cesar's comments reflect a nostalgia for the early days of SNSs, wherein services like Facebook and Twitter were associated with social capital processes like social support exchange and relationship maintenance (Ellison & Vitak, 2015). As I detail below, participants stated that such processes are now linked to the use of BSMPs.

Contextual factors such as the demand for more mediated communication due to the COVID-19 pandemic (de Souza e Silva & Xiong-Gum, 2023; Molla, 2021) as well as technical developments that have made BSMPs easier to use than in the past have also contributed to this shift. With the pandemic, "[it] forced a lot more people to take these modes of communication more seriously," said participant Ben, who noted that he has always preferred communicating in more private online spaces such as Internet Relay Chats. He added that those spaces were mainly used by technologically savvy people like him. but now people "can't use technical ignorance as an excuse anymore" as there are a variety of BSMPs that are more broadly used by people with a wide range of technological skills. This was also reflected in some of the older participants' perceptions regarding BSMPs. For example, Allen, who is 76 years old, compared WhatsApp to email and stated that "I can still do the basic WhatsApp, send a message, receive a message.

Whereas most email formats have gotten so complicated, I'm discouraged by them.” Similarly, Chamomile described how BSMPs are now more accessible and easier to use than they were 10-15 years ago, when Chamomile and their friends used Skype for group chats: “It's more common now to have a group chat, but I did it back in the Skype days. So, it's kind of the same to me, but it's a lot easier to use [now].”

Thus, overall, participants reflected on how the advantages associated with BSMPs, the shortcomings linked to PESM, and contextual factors have led to people increasingly turning to BSMPs to communicate with others.

6.1.2 Purposes for Using BSMPs

Maintaining relationships with family and friends is the primary purpose for using BSMPs for many participants. For example, Johnny described how they use private Discord servers and Slack workspaces to communicate with “people you can really be connected to in a social sense, your friends or family.” Zoe noted that WeChat is “the reason why I'm still connected to my family and friends, especially friends that I'm not seeing every day.” This aligns with extant research on the use of BSMPs, especially private chats within mobile messaging services, to maintain relationships with close friends and family (Cui, 2016; Matassi et al., 2019).

Those belonging to immigrant or diasporic communities in particular touched on this purpose for using BSMPs, echoing existing scholarship (Wallis, 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). Tiff, who is an international graduate student in the U.S. said, “I'm very grateful for personal messaging apps because as someone who's moved around so much, it really helps with keeping in touch with friends or communities that I really don't get to see very often.” Immigrant and diasporic participants also described how they use specific BSMPs because of preferences in their home countries. Many mentioned using private chats within mobile messaging services to

communicate with loved ones back home as these free or affordable services are more accessible and popular in many parts of the world, especially the Global South (Wodinsky, 2021).

WhatsApp is so dominant in Costa Rica that Cruz described their communication as such:

“Culturally, I’m used to [WhatsApp]. And so, there’s that level of connection, keeping in touch with my friends and family in a way that’s recognizable by them.” Thus, it is important to acknowledge that the use of a particular BSMP may not be informed by affordances or preferences, but may be a result of wanting to meet people where they are.

Joining private groups, servers, and chats organized around shared interests is another common purpose for using BSMPs. Not dissimilar from discussion boards and forums of the past, people use BSMPs to find like-minded others to exchange information on their favorite activities. Private Facebook groups, which can be found through keyword searches or invitations from current members, and Discord servers, which require an invitation code, are both popular ways for users to find community on BSMPs. Scholarship has demonstrated that BSMPs are the “new way” for interest-based communities to exist (Deshbandhu & Sahni, 2023; He et al., 2023). Again, as with discussion boards and forums, this is especially important for those who do not have a community for their interest that is geographically proximate (Wang & Sandner, 2019). This was the case with Bette and private Facebook groups:

Living in semi-rural Kentucky, I would never be able to find people who I have certain things in common with, but I have been able to find them in groups and connect with them. And I just feel like I either have support in certain ways, or I can share about our common interests or hobbies.

Andrea noted how she relies on such groups to get parenting advice as well as to connect with others on topics like “bugs and insects” and “gardening,” while Andrew mentioned

communicating with fellow gamers through a private Discord server: “I play a lot of [World of] Warcraft and I have a group of friends there. We have our own Discord channel that we use to help just communicate events with our different guild members.” Indeed, Discord’s early users were primarily video game players who leveraged its voice chat feature to interact while engaging in online gaming (Jiang et al., 2019).

It is also common for people to use multiple BSMPs for different purposes as this allows them to communicate with different audiences. Alfonso’s account encapsulates this. He said: “I use Telegram a lot to talk to friends in Ukraine. Since the war started, I think more of us are switching to Signal. And I also use Signal for most of my work colleagues.” He stated that he also uses WhatsApp for “social organizing for church” and for his “running group.” This demonstrates the utility of studying a variety of BSMPs rather than focusing on a specific app or service. Examining the use of multiple BSMPs is both reflective of people’s lived experiences and reveals the different purposes for which they use BSMPs.

Participants also described using different BSMPs to engage with news and information. As this closely relates to the outcome of information credibility evaluation, participants’ accounts regarding their use of BSMPs for this purpose are presented in more detail in response to RQ4 (see Section 6.4.1).

6.1.3 BSMPs for Active Use, PESM for Passive Content Consumption

The aforementioned purposes for using BSMPs do not exist in isolation. We know from previous research that people frequently view social media elements and platforms in comparison to each other (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Bode & Vraga, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2019). Thus, it is unsurprising that in describing their purposes for using BSMPs, participants often made comparisons with their use of PESM. They noted that while they primarily associate

BSMPs with active use to communicate with interpersonal ties and people with shared interests, wherein active use refers to direct exchanges with people through posts, comments, and messages (Verduyn et al., 2017), they turn to PESM to passively consume content for entertainment purposes. For instance, Ravi said:

I think scrolling through your iMessage or WhatsApp is more about looking up recently relevant information or a more direct interaction that you want to either recall or respond [to]. Whereas in the other forums [Facebook and Instagram], it's more about content consumption. And it's not about having to respond or engage, it's just about being able to consume content.

While there is evidence that PESM on TikTok are primarily used for passive consumption of entertainment content (Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021), the participants indicated that this also extends to other PESM like their feeds on Instagram and Facebook. Some participants also said they very rarely post to their profile or publicly engage with others on Instagram, Twitter, or TikTok. Instead, they view “newsfeeds” or “For You” pages on such platforms as providing content for the purpose of being entertained and distracted. Referring to her Instagram feed, Diane said “it is just quick fix entertainment,” while Elise said that “I think of myself as a consumer, as a person sitting in front of a TV, on Instagram.” Similarly, KC described the purpose for using TikTok as “seeing photos or videos of things people are doing and scrolling through it as more of an entertainment thing.”

The fact that these “newsfeeds” or “For You” pages are algorithmically controlled also informs the view that they are for entertainment purposes. Here, it is important to note that when participants refer to algorithms, they are discussing content ranking systems that decide the position of content on social media “newsfeeds” or “For You” pages based on a variety of

factors, including the content's relevance to the user based on past activity and how much engagement the content is getting (Oremus et al., 2021). Participants explained that they believe that to maximize engagement, content ranking algorithms on PESM prioritize entertainment content from public figures and influencers over content shared by their interpersonal ties. For instance, Bette stated that "when I scroll Instagram, it's mostly not people that I actually know. It's businesses or brands or famous people and they're just popping up on my feed. And I'm not really sure how or why, but they're there." This also explains why, as noted above, some participants said that PESM are not associated with social interactions like they used to be when platforms like Facebook and Twitter first became popular. Instead, "newsfeeds" or "For You" pages on these platforms are now associated with consuming content from celebrities, influencers, and other public figures as content ranking algorithms are believed to prioritize such content. This echoes extant scholarship on how users have folk theories about how social media content ranking algorithms work, wherein folk theories refer to people's intuitive and everyday understandings of how media works (DeVito et al., 2018; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). To be sure, content on *some* BSMPs like private Facebook groups is also algorithmically-ranked. However, as this content only comes from group members rather than any "suggested" pages or popular celebrity and influencer accounts, participants did not feel like algorithms impacted their engagement with content within these groups.

This is not to say that PESM are completely devoid of sociality. It is important to note that people often share the content they consume on PESM through BSMPs to help stay connected with family and friends, demonstrating how BSMPs and PESM can complement each other. Manaal described this while discussing TikTok, stating that "your interaction becomes more interesting because you're like, oh, this person doesn't have TikTok, but I can send it

[TikTok videos] to them through iMessage.” And, of course, content from PESM can also be physically shared with interpersonal ties in face-to-face interactions.

This is also not to say that PESM are content wastelands. While participants often stated that they have stopped posting on PESM (i.e., on their profiles and/or public groups/pages) for social purposes, some did reveal that they post publicly on platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram for professional purposes. For example, Pam stated that, “on Facebook, I post my real estate listings and I do get several likes there.” When asked about why she used her Facebook profile for this purpose, she noted that “it can reach to a wider audience. It doesn't [just] go to the people that you know, it goes to others too.” This ironically echoes the very thing that participants complained about: the amount of advertising and non-social content on PESM. However, overall, participants associated BSMPs with actively communicating with others, while PESM were mainly associated with passive consumption of content.

6.1.4 Summary of RQ1 Findings

BSMPs are viewed as places for active social media use, namely interacting with family, friends, and people with shared interests and hobbies. This aligns with Hall's (2023) argument that people use private messaging to engage in active social media use. It also demonstrates that other BSMPs like private Discord servers and Facebook groups serve a similar purpose. In comparison, PESM are viewed as algorithmically-curated entertainment spaces, which somewhat diverges from existing literature on PESM. Scholars in the past have underscored how people use PESM to stay connected to weak ties through publicly engaging with status updates and liking or commenting on posts (Ellison et al., 2007; Ellison & Vitak, 2015). Yet, the interviews reveal that in the current mediated landscape, PESM are instead primarily used to consume

algorithmically-suggested content from influencers, businesses, and public figures on “newsfeeds” and “For You” pages.

6.2 RQ2: Affordances of BSMPs

In addressing RQ2, I now focus on the main affordances of BSMPs. The interviews reveal that BSMPs *discourage* visibility and *encourage* personalization and synchronicity, echoing extant research detailed in Chapter 3. As I outline in the subsequent sections, participants emphasized that both social and technological factors inform how these specific affordances operate. Furthermore, these affordances can operate differently for different people, depending on how they are situated within broader social structures and contexts. Finally, in describing these affordances, participants often made comparisons between BSMPs and PESM.

6.2.1 Visibility

BSMPs are largely considered “private,” highly associated with known and intended audiences, and perceived as difficult to access and search. For example, Bette said that BSMPs like private Facebook groups feel “more private,” are associated with “an intentional audience,” and “what is posted on there is going to stay in there.” Cruz emphasized how private chats on WhatsApp facilitate more control over accessibility and allow them to communicate with a known audience, especially compared to Instagram: “It's a more controlled environment, it's more private. I can see exactly who is in the group. On my Instagram, anybody can look up my profile.” This aligns with extant literature on how BSMPs allow users to control the visibility boundaries for the content they post, enabling them to restrict access to only known audiences (Malinen, 2021; Swart et al., 2019). These quotes also demonstrate that BSMPs *discourage* socially mediated visibility, which, as noted in Section 3.2.1, is conversely associated with persistence, shareability, searchability, and unintended audiences.

In comparison to BSMPs, PESM *encourage* such socially mediated visibility.

Participants described PESM as being persistent, publicly accessible, searchable, and associated with shareable content that can reach unintended audiences. Sarah mentioned persistence within the context of Instagram: “whatever you post, stays in your feed, on the grid at least. So, friends, or people who you end up meeting, say, three years from now, will still be able to see what you've done.” Here, the “grid” refers to the collection of posts on Instagram that are visible to anyone who accesses your Instagram profile. Unless they are deleted, these posts remain on a users’ profile indefinitely, as opposed to “Stories,” which are ephemeral posts that typically disappear 24 hours after they are uploaded (Triệu & Baym, 2020). Audrey specifically highlighted searchability as a distinguishing factor between BSMPs and PESM: “the one big distinction from a security perspective that does matter to me is that my posts aren't searchable.” Thus, while PESM continue to be associated with persistence (boyd, 2010; Fox & Moreland, 2015) as well as searchability (Zappavigna, 2015), in contrast, BSMPs are associated with control over who can access and search the content one posts.

Broader social structures and contextual factors also inform the extent to which BSMPs *discourage* visibility, echoing Davis’s (2020) argument that affordances operate differently for different people situated within different contexts. While most participants highlighted how BSMPs generally *discourage* visibility, for those who use BSMPs within platforms or services with strong ties to authoritarian governments known for digital surveillance, there was a sense that they could not assume that what happens in the BSMP stays in the BSMP. For example, Elise described how socio-political factors like Chinese government surveillance mean that for her, BSMPs within WeChat do not discourage visibility to the same degree: “There's the underlying audience, as in, the Chinese government developers. Honestly, I've always been

aware of that since I've used WeChat. I know that everything I say is going to be recorded.” And while the Chinese app WeChat is an obvious case (Harwit, 2017), nearly all BSMPs have content that may ultimately become visible to the corporation or to law enforcement with a warrant. Exceptions include services with strong end-to-end encryption like Signal. As discussed below in Section 6.2.2.1, some participants preferred using Signal for this reason.

Similarly, content on BSMPs may not “stay there” due to human actions as well. As noted in Chapter 3, content shared on most BSMPs can be captured through a screenshot or a photograph and shared with wider and unintended audiences (Jaynes, 2020), including for harmful purposes like harassing individuals (Davis Kempton, 2020; Powell et al., 2022). However, Xavier highlighted how BSMPs *discourage* visibility by making this line of action difficult and time-consuming, rather than impossible:

If you are going to take a screenshot from a more private group conversation or an individual direct messaging conversation, then you have to scroll to what you want to share, probably take multiple screenshots, and then decide how you're going to share them out. Are you going to message them to somebody else? Are you going to post them? So, it's a more tedious process.

In comparison, on PESM, “if it's something shared on your wall or a post on Instagram, they can click the share button,” making this “an easy process.” This demonstrates that focusing on *how* affordances operate can illuminate how a technology makes a certain line of action easier or more difficult (Davis, 2020). Furthermore, participants noted that in some private Facebook groups, this line of action is explicitly discouraged. As Mallory said, “the groups around LGBTQ identity, there are norms about not screenshotting and sharing because this is dealing with people's safety.” This illustrates that because of their position within broader social structures,

those belonging to marginalized communities need BSMPs to discourage visibility to an even greater degree. This is echoed in much scholarship on the use of BSMPs among marginalized groups (Miao & Chan, 2023; Pinch et al., 2022).

Overall, therefore, BSMPs *discourage* socially mediated visibility, especially in comparison to PESM. The degree to which they discourage visibility is also informed by users' position with respect to broader social structures. Beyond these general perceptions, it is also important to understand what contributes to the belief that BSMPs *discourage* socially mediated visibility. As discussed in Section 3.2.1, socially mediated visibility is a multifaceted concept consisting of three dimensions; it is strategic, relational, and outcome-driven. Thus, I examine participants' views regarding socially mediated visibility on BSMPs across these different dimensions.

6.2.1.1 Strategic Management. BSMPs allow for the strategic management of visibility, which refers to the control individuals have over drawing boundaries between what is seen and not seen (Pearce et al., 2018) . They do so through encryption and administrator control over groups with both tools and screening questions, according to participants.

Encryption features associated with private chats on certain mobile messaging services were cited by participants as facilitating the management of visibility. Encryption features have been noted as a key element of visibility management on BSMPs, especially for activists and journalists (Gursky et al., 2022; Lokot, 2020; Santos et al., 2021). Participants said that they believe these features allow them to manage the level of access larger institutions like corporations and governments have over what they post. Cesar perceived that “Signal is also rock solid encrypted,” ensuring that messages sent are “safe from not only individuals or companies, but [also] from government entities.” Participants compared this to PESM, where

content is visible to technology companies and used to promote advertisements to users. For example, Becky said that “if you're posting on your wall or your feed, that's where the commercials are coming in,” reflecting how “metadata is being used without question.” Here, metadata refers to information about content posted on social media such as the poster’s IP address, locational information, and device information (DeNardis & Hackl, 2015). Furthermore, participants discussed how content posted on PESM could be picked up by algorithms and made visible to an unintended audience. As Anders stressed, on Twitter and Instagram, “there's an algorithm that distributes [content] to people who don't follow you, because maybe they share followers or share topics. And you don't have a lot of control or knowledge over it.” This aligns with Abidin’s (2021) contention that private groups on social media are associated with refracted publics, wherein people strategically avoid detection from “non-target human eyeballs,” which refers to unintended audiences, and “machine vision” in the form of social media algorithms (p. 3).

Administrator control over groups with both tools and screening questions is the other main way in which visibility is strategically managed on BSMPs. For example, participants mentioned the requirement to answer screening questions on private Facebook groups when discussing visibility management. This refers to the practice wherein people are asked to respond to certain questions to confirm that they meet the requirements for being added to a private group. For example, a private neighborhood group may ask potential members to confirm their address or the cross-streets they live on. Participants said that these screening questions help to ensure that only intended audiences are part of these groups and can see what they post. Becky reflected on this when describing participation in a private alumni group for her high school: “we have the entry questions to make sure that you actually went to [the school].” However, it is

important to note that participants also mentioned that some groups have screening questions wherein answers can be easily falsified. They felt that they have less control over managing visibility in such groups. The need to avoid such situations is amplified in groups on sensitive topics and/or containing people belonging to marginalized communities. For example, Audrey underscored the strictness of the screening process to be admitted into a private Facebook group on infertility issues: “The groups were even stricter, asking you to provide your lab results, to make sure that your lab results actually were indicative of this condition.” It is therefore particularly important for people who are part of groups on sensitive topics and/or containing marginalized communities that these groups strongly *discourage* socially mediated visibility through strict screening questions. This, again, demonstrates how affordances operate differently for different people, depending on how they are socially situated (Davis, 2020).

Once screening questions are answered, members still need to be approved by an administrator before they become part of a private group on Facebook. Participants like Francesca emphasized how this mechanism does not always allow for a high degree of control over visibility: “I have less control over my private Facebook groups because [members of] those [groups] are admitted [to the group] by someone else.” In comparison, she noted that small group chats with family members on WhatsApp feel “very secure” because only she and her family members have control over who is allowed to participate in the chat. Indeed, in describing the level of strategic control they have over managing visibility across different BSMPs, many participants emphasized that private messaging feels the most secure. As Audrey stated, “text threads are all very private. I don't imagine that there's any way that they would make it onto the wider internet without a subpoena.” This indicates that while members of private Facebook groups have to rely on a few administrators to control visibility boundaries (Malinen, 2021),

private messaging within mobile messaging services and social media platforms allow for greater perceived, and perhaps, actual personal control over these boundaries.

Thus, overall, participants described how BSMPs facilitate strategic management of visibility through different mechanisms and features. They feel in control of managing their visibility to varying degrees across different BSMPs and feel little control over managing visibility on PESM.

6.2.1.2 Relationality. As noted in Chapter 3, the relational aspect of socially mediated visibility is associated with perceived interactivity with unintended audiences (Pearce et al., 2018); however, on BSMPs, the audience is often restricted to close friends and family. Participants stated that this contributes to their perception that BSMPs *discourage* visibility as they believe that there is an implicit understanding and trust between interpersonal ties that anything shared within BSMPs will not be further shared with unintended audiences. As May stated, “I think [not sharing personal communication between friends with others] is a general rule of friendship. We have this level of relation with each other and we can share information that stays between us.” Similarly, Ravi said that “the personal connection, the depth and strength of relationships, meeting those people every day, knowing about their lives, knowing who they are. That gives me certain confidence that anything I share with them is private.” Thus, May and Ravi highlight how interpersonal trust contributes to the belief that content posted on a BSMP will not be shared beyond that BSMP. This aligns with extant literature on how sharing content posted by an interpersonal tie outside of a private group chat is considered a breach of trust (Jaynes, 2020).

Alfonso also reflected on this and stated that he views BSMPs as private because “I know those people personally.” He added that this results in him feeling free to engage in disclosure on

BSMPs: “I can be much more open in those groups, and share a lot more directly. And I consider what's in those groups to be private.” This relates to the oft-studied link between visibility and disclosure. While scholars have examined how PESM encourage disclosure and expression (Pearce et al., 2018), especially as this supports their business model (Hoffman et al., 2018), Alfonso’s account demonstrates that BSMPs encourage disclosure and expression through *discouraging* visibility.

This sense of trust that content will not be shared outside of a BSMP also exists in interest and hobby-based private groups and servers, albeit not to the same degree. Even as people do not necessarily feel the same sense of relational closeness with others within these BSMPs, participants emphasized that a culture of trust can develop over time in such groups and servers. As Bette stated, there is a “culture of private groups where it's just this understanding that people have. What you post in the group stays in the group.” And in some groups, there are also formal policies about this. This indicates that within *some* interest-based private groups and servers, there may be an implicit or explicit understanding between people that what is shared within the BSMP stays within the BSMP. This aligns with research on how visibility boundaries are collectively managed within private groups on social media (Mansour & Francke, 2021). However, participants also highlighted that their disclosures within such groups and servers are often less personal compared to what they post in groups and chats consisting of close interpersonal ties.

Thus, overall, participants emphasized that the trust they have in the people they interact with on BSMPs contributes to them associating these places with a low visibility. To be sure, this link between BSMPs discouraging visibility and the nature of the audience people interact with within these places is bidirectional. On the one hand, as people trust the audience they interact

with on BSMPs, they believe that what they post within a BSMP will not be shared outside of the BSMP. At the same time, as BSMPs allow for the strategic management of visibility through the mechanisms and features discussed in the previous section, users view BSMPs as safe and private places to interact with trusted close interpersonal ties and people with shared interests and hobbies.

6.2.1.3 Outcomes. As noted above, the outcomes associated with socially mediated visibility are indeterminate and can be both beneficial and harmful (Pearce et al., 2018). The low visibility associated with BSMPs similarly leads to multiple, often divergent, outcomes. Before discussing some of these outcomes, it is vital to note that the link between visibility and the two outcomes I focus on in this dissertation, namely perceived intimacy and information credibility evaluation, is discussed in greater detail in Section 6.3 and 6.4. As is outlined in these sections, the fact that BSMPs *discourage* visibility leads to the perception that these are intimate places where information can be trusted. Beyond these specific outcomes, some participants also highlighted how the low visibility associated with BSMPs leads to beneficial outcomes like social support exchange and collective action as well as more undesirable outcomes like harassment and unwanted contact.

Echoing extant literature, some participants associated BSMPs with the exchange of social support (Chan, 2018; Yeshua-Katz, 2021). In particular, they highlighted how BSMPs facilitate the exchange of informational support, which refers to social support in the form of factual information or advice about an issue (Rains et al., 2015; Xu & Burleson, 2001). Anders mentioned how BSMPs allow him and others to get “advice for physical health issues or mental health issues.” He felt that this is only possible on BSMPs because one “wouldn't want to share [health-related information] publicly just because you don't know who's going to see it.” This

demonstrates how the low visibility associated with BSMPs allows people to acquire informational support about topics that they may not want to discuss in more public online spaces.

Meanwhile, other participants discussed how the low visibility associated with BSMPs facilitates collective action. Echoing research on how private chats on encrypted mobile messaging services allow activists to organize in a secure and private way when faced with state surveillance (Lokot, 2020; Milan & Barbosa, 2020), Cesar discussed the use of encrypted chats on Telegram for the coordination of protests against police brutality:

When I was down at the protests, there were people using Telegram group chats to coordinate things. And so it's definitely used very heavily in times of challenge where people want to be able to communicate in a relatively secure way.

The low visibility associated with BSMPs can also lead to more undesirable outcomes. Studies have found that it can facilitate the sharing of problematic content like racist memes (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2020) and revenge porn, which refers to the non-consensual sharing of sexually explicit images and content (Semenzin & Bainotti, 2020). This is because people may feel emboldened to engage in such activities in the absence of platform moderation and a broad audience to hold them accountable. A few participants brought up examples of undesirable outcomes that result from the low visibility associated with BSMPs. For example, Diane described her experience on a private Facebook group for nannies, stating that when she posted about wanting to meet “other Black, other POC nannies,” she was met with derisive and angry responses from white group members, saying “why don't you want to hang out with us?” This led to her viewing such groups as being “very aggressive.” Meanwhile, participants who identify as women also described receiving unwanted contact through direct messages on social media

platforms like Twitter and Instagram. May provided an example of this happening to her on Twitter: “I just posted a selfie and a bunch of my friends liked it. And I just got a few message requests in my DMs from these random guys.” As noted in Chapter 2, private messages from people who are not mutual connections on social media platforms are typically filtered; however, they are still accessible to people who receive them. Further, while studies have often focused on how women experience harassment on PESM within Facebook and Twitter (Blackwell et al., 2017; Rubin et al., 2020), May’s quote demonstrates that posting on PESM can also result in such harassment occurring through BSMPs within the same platform.

6.2.1.4 Summary. The interviews reveal that BSMPs *discourage* socially mediated visibility. The extent to which they *discourage* visibility varies across different BSMPs, individuals, and contexts. However, in general, these places are considered private, difficult to access and search, and are associated with known and intended audiences. People trust their audience on BSMPs to not share the content they post outside of these places. They also strategically manage visibility through different mechanisms and technological features. This can result in both beneficial and harmful outcomes, aligning with extant scholarship on how the same technological affordance can lead to multiple outcomes, informed by contextual factors and broader social structures (Davis, 2020; Evans et al., 2017).

6.2.2 Personalization

BSMPs allow users to control who they receive relevant content from and who they send relevant content to. Thus, BSMPs *encourage* explicit receiver-oriented personalization, which refers to the ability to customize one’s information environment through controlling who one interacts with (Kümpel, 2021), and sender-oriented personalization, which is the extent to which people can direct content to specific audiences (Fox & McEwan, 2017). Cesar touched on

receiver-oriented personalization, stating that on BSMPs, “being able to filter what you see is just a matter of choosing yes or no to getting invited to particular groups.” Meanwhile, Amy Allen underscored the sender-oriented personalization associated with BSMPs: “Setting up a group chat to communicate with a specific set of people is really easy on Telegram.”

Beyond these general perceptions, it is important to examine the factors that contribute to participants believing that BSMPs *encourage* receiver and sender-oriented personalization. As I detail below, participants revealed that the nature of the audience they interact with and the degree of control they have to curate this audience, and consequently their information environment, contribute to this belief.

6.2.2.1 Receiver-Oriented Personalization. BSMPs allow users to curate their information environment so that they primarily receive content that they consider personally relevant. Becky underscored how this makes BSMPs distinct from PESM:

If I only go to my private groups, I don't have to deal with the clutter. It's like walking into the airport bookstore. You have all the magazines and you really only want one magazine, you don't need to look at all the other magazines.

Participants noted that there are two main reasons for this. First, it is a result of *who* they interact with on BSMPs. Second, it is informed by the degree of control they have over curating their audience and information environment on BSMPs in the absence of content ranking algorithms, especially compared to PESM.

6.2.2.1.1 Audience on BSMPs. Echoing extant literature (Goh et al., 2019; Masip et al., 2021; Lou et al., 2021), participants believed that they receive relevant content on BSMPs because the interpersonal ties they interact with within these places are familiar with their interests. As Ravi stated, “closer friends or people that know me personally will put some

thought into...will this piece of news or information be interesting to the other person?"

Similarly, Sarah noted that "the people who send me stuff on WhatsApp or Telegram know what my interests are. So, they send something which is in line with that." However, she also described how the exception to this is extended family group chats on WhatsApp, where family members share content that does not always feel relevant to her: "It's a family group, [so] there might be something which is nostalgic to them, which is not really something I would know about. Maybe an old song or a post about an actor or even something religious." This demonstrates that while BSMPs allow people to curate their information environment to some degree, relational obligations to participate in certain chats or groups can also result in people receiving content that feels irrelevant and non-personalized.

BSMPs also allow people to receive relevant and personalized content by making it easy to self-select into private groups and servers organized around specific interests and hobbies. For example, Ian said that "[when] I'm going to those groups, I'm going there for very specific topics." Similarly, KC described participating in private groups related to Ultimate Frisbee: "Everybody in that group knows some other large portion of the group through doing an activity that we all enjoy. So, that's probably why it feels more relevant. Because we're all there for a shared interest." To be sure, people can also self-select into public groups and servers about topics they are interested in. However, many participants stated that these public spaces feel cluttered and include off-topic posts. As Andrew noted, on public Discord servers, content "would just get lost." Furthermore, as discussed in Section 6.2.1, some participants described how they are members of interest-centered private groups about sensitive topics and therefore they value the low visibility associated with BSMPs.

Thus, overall, as BSMPs allow users to restrict their audience to interpersonal ties and those with shared interests, these places are associated with receiving relevant and personalized content. In other words, BSMPs *encourage* explicit receiver-oriented personalization because they allow users to only interact with intended audiences. This demonstrates that the low visibility associated with BSMPs acts as a root affordance (Flyverbom et al., 2016; Lane et al., 2018), underpinning the receiver-oriented personalization associated with these places.

6.2.2.1.2 Control on BSMPs. The absence of content ranking algorithms on BSMPs also contributes to the belief that these places *encourage* explicit receiver-oriented personalization. Many participants underscored that in the absence of such algorithms, they believe that they have personal control and agency over curating the audience they receive content from, and consequently, their information environment. In comparison, on PESM, algorithms have control over determining their information environment. For instance, Amy Allen said:

I do have a lot more control over what I see on Telegram. No one is suggesting you should follow this person. It's not going to start autoplaying someone's reels if I accidentally click something wrong. It's not constantly trying to suggest new crap for me to keep me more engaged.

Meanwhile, Johny also touched on this idea and highlighted how content on BSMPs is presented chronologically rather than through algorithmic ranking. They said that “I choose to interact with things in a temporal fashion, not [based on] what the algorithm thinks is important. I don't need the algorithm to decide for me.” They added that they prefer private servers on Discord because “Discord is in order of conversations happening. And if I want to scroll back to a specific day or search for a specific keyword, I can do that. That's how I want to interact with my friends and with my loose acquaintances.” As mentioned in Section 6.1, participants noted that, in contrast,

algorithms on PESM often suggest irrelevant content from public figures and advertisers. This aligns with existing research on social media algorithms and personalization, which finds that people often associate algorithmic information curation with a lack of control and agency (Swart, 2021).

To be sure, not every participant believed that this lack of agency leads to PESM feeling less personalized. For example, in discussing the Instagram algorithm, Diane said that “they’ve pinned me pretty well because I keep giving them feedback.” She further described how her Instagram feed is relevant to her interests as it shows her content related to women and travel, wellness, and mental health. Similarly, Andrea reflected on her Facebook newsfeed and said “the algorithm has gotten pretty good. I’ve definitely helped to train it by telling it if something isn’t relevant.” Both Diane and Andrea’s accounts, however, illustrate that personalization on algorithmically-controlled PESM requires effort in the form of individuals giving regular feedback about what is and is not relevant to them. This indicates that while PESM do not *refuse* receiver-oriented personalization, they *discourage* it by making this line of action more difficult to carry out (Davis, 2020). It is not impossible, but it can be tedious and time-consuming. Furthermore, training the algorithm to provide more relevant and personalized content also requires digital literacy and technological skills that everyone may not possess (Min, 2019). In comparison, BSMPs *encourage* receiver-oriented personalization by allowing users, including those with limited technological skills, to easily start or join private chats, groups, and servers containing people who share relevant and personalized content with them. The lack of algorithmic curation on BSMPs also results in users believing that they have personal control and agency over personalizing their information environment.

Thus, overall, users believe that BSMPs *encourage* explicit receiver-oriented personalization. In comparison, PESM are associated with implicit receiver-oriented personalization as algorithms decide what is shown to users. Even as Kumpel (2021) contends that explicit and implicit personalization work together on social media, participants distinguished between them and associated the former with receiving more relevant and personalized content.

6.2.2.2 Sender-Oriented Personalization. The sender-oriented conceptualization of personalization refers to the extent to which people can direct content to specific individuals or groups (Fox & McEwan, 2017; Liu & Kang, 2017). BSMPs *encourage* sender-oriented personalization as they make it easy to engage in such targeted communication, especially compared to PESM. For instance, Aryan said, “it is easier to reach a specific target audience within private spaces than in public spaces,” while May described how private chats within mobile messaging services are “the fastest way to reach a specific group.” As they did while discussing receiver-oriented personalization, participants stated that the audience they interact with and the degree of control they have to curate this audience contribute to their belief that BSMPs *encourage* sender-oriented personalization.

6.2.2.2.1 Audience on BSMPs. As noted above, BSMPs allow users to easily self-select into private groups and servers organized around shared interests. This means that users can easily reach out to a specific audience that shares their interests to ask questions and/or acquire advice, reflecting how BSMPs *encourage* sender-oriented personalization. Andrea touched on this while describing her participation in private Facebook groups, saying that “if I wanted to ask a question of people who really like solitary wild bees, I have a group for that.” Mallory also talked about private Facebook groups and said:

These are people who are likely to share a perspective or find similar things important. So, if I asked a large group of foster parents about a parenting challenge I am having, they're not going to come at it with advice from somebody who's not a parent or is a parent of a biological kid.

Andrea and Mallory's accounts align with existing scholarship on how BSMPs like interest-based private Facebook groups are associated with knowledge sharing (Pi et al., 2013). Their quotes also highlight the link between sender-oriented personalization and visibility as they underscore how BSMPs enable them to reach out to *only* intended audiences to acquire specific information. Mallory especially values reaching out to a group where membership is restricted to *only* those who are foster parents as they can draw on their experience and give her valuable advice. Thus, again, the low visibility associated with BSMPs acts as a root affordance and underpins the sender-oriented personalization associated with these places. Furthermore, individuals like Mallory who turn to BSMPs for advice and informational support regarding sensitive topics need these places to *discourage* visibility and *encourage* sender-oriented personalization to a particularly great degree. Once again, this reflects how affordances operate differently for different people, depending on how they are socially situated (Davis, 2020).

Communicating with interpersonal ties on BSMPs is also associated with sender-oriented personalization. Participants described how they use BSMPs to reach out to specific family members or friends to share content that is relevant to them. For instance, Manaal said:

Sometimes you want to share something with *just* (emphasis added) your best friend or your sibling because it's super relevant to them and your relationship

with them rather than with 100 other people. So, having that private chat option is super convenient.

Similarly, Erica said that she has a group chat with her two sisters on Signal, allowing her to directly send them ancestry-related information. She reflected on how this demonstrates the sender-oriented personalization associated with such chats: “when I post on Signal, I know I’m posting to my sisters.” These quotes also illustrate how sender-oriented personalization can lead to the outcome of relational maintenance as sharing relevant information with specific interpersonal ties is a way to maintain relationships. This aligns with extant research on how the reciprocal exchange of information on BSMPs helps people maintain social relationships (Goh et al., 2019).

Overall, the interviews reveal that BSMPs *encourage* sender-oriented personalization as they facilitate targeted communication with specific individuals and groups to acquire information and advice about certain topics and with specific interpersonal ties to maintain relationships with them.

6.2.2.2.2 Control on BSMPs. The absence of content ranking algorithms on BSMPs also informs the perception that these places *encourage* sender-oriented personalization, especially compared to PESM. According to participants, this is because they believe that they have control over content reaching a specific individual or group on BSMPs as what they post is ranked chronologically rather than algorithmically. Meanwhile, on PESM, algorithms control who content is visible to and make it more difficult for their posts to reach specific connections on social media. Zoe made this argument while comparing private chats on WeChat to posting on her main Instagram feed:

For WeChat, I'm 100% sure people are going to see it, even if they don't like it. I know that because there's no algorithm. They don't really block your content because it's just for the people in your contacts. But then for Instagram, they're trying to push it to all your followers and non-followers.

Amy Allen also touched on this and stated that “the important stuff goes to Telegram because I know that everyone will see it.” In comparison, on PESM, the presence of algorithms is viewed as impeding targeted and personalized communication as participants believe that these algorithms suppress the content they post. As Becky stated, “because of the algorithms, my circle of friends that I would think would comment or view, they're not commenting or viewing. So, maybe they're not seeing my posts.” This perceived algorithmic interference is a modern phenomenon as content ranking algorithms on platforms like Facebook and Twitter have become increasingly complex and difficult for users to understand (DeVito et al., 2018; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). Thus, early scholarship on PESM did not grapple with how the presence of these algorithms impacts the use of these spaces to directly reach out to specific individuals or groups. Meanwhile, the absence of such algorithms on BSMPs results in users believing that what they post within these places is visible to the people they are trying to reach. And on certain BSMPs like private chats within mobile messaging services, there are also features like “read receipts” or “blue ticks,” which give users information about who has read their messages and confirm that their message has reached its intended audience. Overall, this contributes to the belief that BSMPs *encourage* sender-oriented personalization.

Control over sender-oriented personalization on BSMPs was especially emphasized when participants discussed private communities within channel-based messaging services like Discord and Slack. This is because, as is detailed in Chapter 2, these services have features that

allow for the segmentation of audiences into different topic-based channels *within* a specific community (Reitman et al., 2021). As Andrew noted, “the servers are broken out into different conversations, by topic, by events.” He said that this resulted in him valuing “the customizability of the way I can post in the private spaces of Discord.” Similarly, Anders said he values how private Discord servers can be segmented into different topic-based channels as “sometimes it's just some niche topic and you can feel more comfortable bringing it up if you don't think it's clogging up the space for everyone else.” This demonstrates that while BSMPs generally *encourage* sender-oriented personalization, the strength of this encouragement is even greater on private communities within channel-based messaging services.

While BSMPs *encourage* sender-oriented personalization in comparison to PESM, it is important to note that PESM do not *refuse* sender-oriented personalization by making it impossible. Rather, they *discourage* this line of action by making it more difficult and time-consuming. Andrea touched on this while reflecting on how she could potentially reach out to specific individuals and groups while posting on her Facebook profile. She said that she was aware that “you can sort your friends into different piles and just post to one specific subgroup at a time.” However, she has not done that “because it feels like work.” Similarly, Ravi described sorting Facebook friends into different subgroups as “time consuming.” He said that on BSMPs, “you already have that curated in advance,” reflecting how people can easily go back to pre-existing chats and groups to reach a specific audience on BSMPs. This demonstrates how BSMPs *encourage* sender-oriented personalization by making this line of action easier to carry out, while PESM *discourage* it by making it tedious and time-consuming. This insight again underscores the utility of examining *how* affordances operate rather than focusing on the presence or absence of affordances (Davis, 2020).

6.2.2.3 Summary. The interviews reveal that BSMPs *encourage* receiver and sender-oriented personalization to varying degrees for different individuals and across different contexts. These places allow users to easily receive relevant content from and send relevant content to a specific audience. The nature of the audience and the level of control users have over curating this audience due to the absence of content ranking algorithms results in them associating BSMPs with both receiver and sender-oriented personalization.

6.2.3 Synchronicity

As detailed in Chapter 3, the affordance of synchronicity is typically associated with immediate feedback and short transmission times between messages (Fox & McEwan, 2017). Chat and messaging-based BSMPs are particularly associated with such immediacy. As May said, “I think in group chats, I expect the response to be really fast, within 20, maybe 30-40 minutes.” Comparing private servers on Discord to asynchronous discussion boards, Cesar stated: “[Discord is] a lot more synchronous, a lot more real time.” However, participants also emphasized that BSMPs *feel* synchronous because they facilitate continuous and uninterrupted conversations, regardless of the transmission time between messages. For example, Ben said that interactions on BSMPs feel like a “continuous conversation” and “even if there are large gaps, chances are, the next message in that channel, even if it's 36 hours later than the previous message, is probably continuing that thread or something related to it.” Aryan similarly touched on this idea of continuous conversations while comparing BSMPs to PESH: “private spaces is a continued conversation versus public spaces is just a point in time.” These quotes demonstrate that BSMPs *encourage* synchronicity through facilitating immediate and/or continuous conversations.

It is also important to understand what contributes to this perception that BSMPs *encourage* synchronicity. Echoing extant literature (Dogruel & Schnauber-Stockmann, 2021; Rettie, 2009), participants stated that technological features as well as social and relational norms and expectations impact the degree to which BSMPs are viewed as synchronous, especially compared to PESH.

6.2.3.1 Technological Features. Technological features like the presence function, which allows users to see if an interactant is online and/or has read their message, and push notifications, which show up on mobile home screens to notify users about new messages, contribute to private chats within mobile messaging services being viewed as especially synchronous. This is because both these features encourage immediate responses to messages. For instance, Pam brought up WhatsApp notifications and said “when you have that message on your WhatsApp, it’s right there. And it’s easy to respond.” Bette mentioned the presence function while describing why mobile messaging services are viewed as synchronous: “[people are] seeing [your messages] often. You can see who’s viewed [your messages] based on what privacy notifications they have.” This aligns with existing literature on how the presence function makes people feel more accountable for responding quickly on mobile messaging services (Mols & Pridmore, 2021).

BSMPs are also more generally viewed as synchronous because the absence of content ranking algorithms makes it easier to encounter and respond to messages. Johny reflected on this while describing how using private Discord servers feels similar to using Facebook *before* the introduction of algorithmically ranked “newsfeeds”:

The way I use the private Discord server feels like how I used to use Facebook.

When I started using Facebook, there was a timeline. If I wanted to see what

somebody posted last Tuesday, I could just scroll back to last Tuesday and see what people posted. And if I posted something, people would see it in their timeline and would respond.

Johny's account demonstrates that as content is typically ranked chronologically rather than algorithmically on BSMPs, viewing and responding to posts or messages from others is easier, facilitating continuous conversations. This also aligns with extant mobile communication scholarship on how conversations through messaging feel continuous as people always have their mobile phones with them (Cui, 2016; Licoppe, 2004). In comparison, sustaining a continuous conversation on PESM is difficult because, as noted above, participants believed that the algorithm suppresses posts from them and their connections within these spaces. As Amy Allen said, "any message that you post [on Telegram], it's still going to be there. Even if you read through and then go off and do your own thing, and then come back later. The algorithm doesn't just disappear it." Thus, the absence of algorithmic content ranking contributes to the belief that one can have continuous conversations on BSMPs.

To be sure, not every participant believed that the absence of algorithms on BSMPs makes it easy to sustain continuous conversations. Aligning with existing literature (Ling & Lai, 2016; Yeshua-Katz, 2021), some participants mentioned how conversation threads can be difficult to follow on large groups and group chats due to the sheer volume of messages. For example, KC said that "sometimes it feels like [content] is lost in the large groups" because "if someone posts about something that's gonna take place with all the details, and then 30 people react or respond to it," it becomes "difficult to scroll through and find that information." However, overall, features like the presence function, push notifications, and the lack of content ranking algorithms contribute to BSMPs being viewed as synchronous.

6.2.3.2 Norms and Expectations. As norms and expectations surrounding response times differ across relationships, people may view BSMPs as more or less synchronous based on *who* they are interacting with within these places. Echoing extant literature (Dogruel & Schnauber-Stockmann, 2021), some participants said that close interpersonal ties expect near-immediate responses on BSMPs. As Matthew noted about BSMPs specifically, “if somebody sent something to me, I have a responsibility to respond to it.” May compared this to the weak ties she interacts with on PESM when she responds to comments on Instagram: “[on Instagram] it's people who you don't really keep in contact with every day. So, you value their interactions, but it's not something you would really prioritize to get back to.” Some participants also noted that their familiarity with the interpersonal ties they interact with on BSMPs means that both parties know when to expect a response. Even if responses take some time, it still feels like a continuous conversation as long as these expectations are not violated. This is because when expectations are met while interacting with close interpersonal ties on BSMPs, conversations *feel* synchronous. Manaal reflected on this idea:

When I'm reaching out to someone on private chat, I already have an idea of how long they take to respond to messages on a general basis. So, I already have that expectation in mind. Okay, this person takes an hour, this person takes three business days. I'll hear back soon enough.

This echoes existing literature on how close interpersonal ties develop expectations regarding response times on mediated channels (Heston & Birnholtz, 2017; Tu et al., 2018).

Expectations regarding response times are also shaped by the geographical location of who one is interacting with on BSMPs. As noted in Chapter 5, I oversampled for people belonging to immigrant and diasporic communities. These participants highlighted how they

often use BSMPs to interact with friends and family members in different time zones and do not expect them to respond immediately. Quill encapsulated this while describing her family group chats on WhatsApp, “on the family groups, because we have people in Brazil, in different parts of the U.S., in Italy, in Finland, there’s a time difference. So, I don't think anybody expects an answer in less than 24 hours.” Conversations with interpersonal ties in other time zones also *feel* synchronous and continuous as long as expectations regarding response times are not violated.

Meanwhile, expectations regarding response times in interest and hobby-based private groups are informed by the size and culture of the group. In the larger groups, there is less familiarity with individual people and therefore there are no set expectations. However, in the smaller groups, people generally expect quick responses. Bette discussed this within the context of private Facebook groups:

If it's either something hyperlocal, I know them in person, or it's a small group, under 100 people, then [there is] an expectation that people are going to see it and engage with it, versus if it's a more impersonal, bigger group.

These expectations are also informed by the group’s culture and norms that have developed over time. Alfonso reflected on this while comparing his church WhatsApp group to his running club WhatsApp group: “[The church WhatsApp group] doesn't have a culture of messaging back quickly, whereas my run club group has a culture of messaging back very quickly.” This demonstrates how norms and expectations at a group level can shape the extent to which a certain BSMP is associated with immediate feedback.

6.2.3.3 Summary. BSMPs are viewed as *encouraging* synchronicity and this view is informed by both technological features and social and relational expectations and norms. While synchronicity is typically associated with immediate feedback, conversations on BSMPs often

feel synchronous and continuous, regardless of the transmission time between messages. The fact that content is typically ranked chronologically rather than algorithmically and that there are shared expectations regarding response times among interpersonal ties contribute to this feeling. Furthermore, the degree to which BSMPs *encourage* synchronicity varies across different relationships and different BSMPs, with private mobile messaging chats comprising of close friends and family being viewed as especially synchronous.

6.2.4 Summary of RQ2 Findings

The findings outlined above highlight how BSMPs *discourage* visibility and *encourage* personalization and synchronicity. The strength of this encouragement or discouragement varies across individuals, contexts, and different BSMPs. For instance, those who are part of marginalized communities require that BSMPs *discourage* visibility and *encourage* personalization to an especially strong degree as interacting with unintended audiences can leave them open to negative outcomes like harassment. Given these concerns, they gravitate toward especially secure BSMPs like encrypted private chats within mobile messaging services or private Facebook groups with strict screening questions. This demonstrates why it is important to focus on *how* and *for whom* and *under what circumstances* affordances operate rather than simply identifying the affordances associated with a technology (Davis, 2020).

The interviews also reveal that technological features, especially the absence of content ranking algorithms on BSMPs, and social and relational factors, particularly the nature of the audience on BSMPs, inform how these affordances operate. The absence of content ranking algorithms means that people feel confident that what they post on BSMPs will not reach unintended audiences, will be visible to intended audiences, and be part of a continuous conversation. In comparison, on PESM, algorithms are associated with making content visible to

unintended rather than intended audiences, suggesting non-personalized content from public figures and influencers, and hindering the ability to have continuous conversations. Furthermore, as the audience on BSMPs is mainly close friends and family and/or people with shared interests, people trust this audience to send them relevant content and not share their posts and messages with unintended audiences. People's familiarity with this audience also allows them to develop shared expectations regarding response times, resulting in conversations feeling continuous on BSMPs. Finally, it is also important to acknowledge that the nature of this audience on BSMPs is, in part, informed by the technological features associated with these places. Due to the absence of content ranking algorithms and the presence of visibility control mechanisms, users view BSMPs as suitable places to safely and privately communicate with close interpersonal ties and people with shared interests and hobbies. Thus, these findings demonstrate how technological features act in concert with social and relational factors to inform how affordances operate (Davis, 2020; Evans et al., 2017).

6.3 RQ3: Perceived Intimacy of BSMPs

The word “intimate” was often used by participants to describe BSMPs, especially when they compared these places to PESM. For example, Andrew described the private Discord server he uses for gaming as an “intimate space,” while Daya compared WhatsApp to publicly posting on Facebook and said that “WhatsApp is more intimate.” While this echoes existing scholarship that underscores how users describe BSMPs as intimate (Archer et al., 2021; Schreiber, 2017), much of this work stops short at this description and does not examine how users' perceptions of BSMPs relate to the different ways in which intimacy has been conceptualized by scholars. Thus, in the next section, I detail how participants' perceptions regarding BSMPs relate to existing conceptualizations of intimacy.

6.3.1 *Conceptualizations of Intimacy*

As noted in Chapter 4, a conceptual definition of intimacy is experiencing someone's wholeness and innermost being (Hu et al., 2004). BSMPs are associated with this experience, especially compared to PESM. Chamomile illustrated this by describing private Telegram chats and Discord servers as “a place where people know me and they're seeing me as a person. Not as a random tweet or a stranger.” Similarly, Johny said that “Slack and Discord is really integral to my social identity,” whereas publicly posting on Facebook “has very little to do with what I consider my core self.” These quotes demonstrate that BSMPs are not just perceived as intimate in isolation; rather, their perceived intimacy is articulated in comparison to PESM. While PESM are associated with content from influencers, public figures, and advertisers, BSMPs are comparatively linked to meaningful interactions where people's wholeness and innermost being can be experienced.

Another conceptualization of intimacy, especially in relation to mediated channels, is that intimacy is associated with social presence (Gunawardena, 1995; Pittman & Reich, 2016), which refers to the extent to which interactions via a mediated channel feel salient or real (Short et al., 1976). This conceptualization of intimacy was also reflected in how some participants described BSMPs. For example, Becky described her experience of using private Facebook groups as such: “I go in there and I feel this is a safe space. Like, if I was walking into a physical room. I feel I'm going into a room with my friends.”

Overall, BSMPs are associated with experiencing people's whole self and innermost being and facilitating interactions associated with social presence, wherein it feels like interactants are in the same physical space. This echoes some of the different conceptualizations of intimacy detailed in Chapter 4 (Gunawardena, 1995; Hu et al., 2004; Pittman & Reich, 2016).

As is outlined below, participants also highlighted how the different affordances associated with BSMPs inform these perceptions.

6.3.2 Affordances and Perceived Intimacy

The fact that BSMPs *discourage* visibility and *encourage* personalization and synchronicity contributes to these places being perceived as intimate, especially compared to PESM. In particular, these affordances are linked to the perception that BSMPs engender social presence, which as noted above, is associated with intimacy.

6.3.2.1 Visibility. As noted in Section 6.2.1, BSMPs encourage disclosure and expression through *discouraging* visibility. Participants revealed that this freedom to express themselves, especially with close interpersonal ties, results in them viewing BSMPs as intimate. As Amy Allen said:

[Telegram has] done a lot to keep me connected in a more intimate way with people that I am separated from geographically. In public, everyone has to at least be a little bit presentable. But in Telegram, we can say all the weird things that come to mind.

This aligns with existing research on how people use private chats on platforms like Snapchat to share mundane and spontaneous experiences with low concerns for self-presentation (Bayer et al., 2016). Such chats have also been found to engender social presence (Kahlow et al., 2016). This was echoed in some participants' accounts regarding how the low visibility associated with BSMPs results in them feeling like they are having face-to-face conversations within these places. For instance, May described private chats on mobile messaging services as "more intimate." When asked about what contributes to this perception, she said:

I think it's the privacy that you feel with those one-on-one chat rooms or those smaller group chats, where you feel like, oh, it's as if you're standing in the room with a person. And it's only you and then you can share whatever you'd like.

This aligns with existing literature that emphasizes how the strict visibility boundaries and privacy associated with BSMPs facilitate trust and intimacy within these places (Alinejad, 2019; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2018; Xiong & Liu, 2022).

In comparison, as PESM *encourage* visibility, they are associated with inauthenticity and performativity rather than intimacy. Tiff drew this distinction between BSMPs and PESM, stating that “it would really just be the difference between personal communication and something more performative or general or not my full self.” This aligns with extant scholarship linking PESM to idealized self-presentation (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Marwick & boyd, 2010; Vitak & Kim, 2014).

Thus, overall, the low visibility associated with BSMPs allows people to authentically express themselves, resulting in these places being perceived as intimate, especially compared to PESM, which are viewed as inauthentic and performative spaces. This indicates that interacting on BSMPs, especially with close interpersonal ties, is associated with both authenticity and intimacy, while publicly posting on PESM is associated with performatively catering to one’s audience. Since visibility is a root affordance (Flyverbom et al., 2016; Lane et al., 2018), it is unsurprisingly most strongly linked to the perceived intimacy of BSMPs. Indeed, in comparison to the other affordances discussed below, participants most often mentioned how the low visibility associated with BSMPs contributes to them viewing these places as intimate and as somewhere they can engage in genuine and authentic interactions.

6.3.2.2 Personalization. The fact that BSMPs *encourage* receiver and sender-oriented personalization also contributes to these places being perceived as intimate. Receiver-oriented personalization refers to how BSMPs allow users to personalize their information environment and receive relevant content. Some participants said that since they receive personalized content from interpersonal ties and/or people with shared interests rather than algorithmically-suggested content and advertising, they associate BSMPs with social presence and therefore intimacy.

Ben's description of private workspaces on Slack encapsulated this view:

In Slack's case, there's no advertising, there's no promoted content. It's 100% just what we put there. So, I know that every message in chat was actually typed by a real human or a bot that a real human wrote. There is no manipulation, there is no gaming, there is no spam. In communication terms, it's just like walking into a room and the room is full of my friends.

Ben's emphasis on interacting with "real humans" rather than being manipulated by digital technologies relates to HCI scholarship on interacting with digital technologies and social presence (Kim & Sundar, 2012; Xu & Liao, 2020). Ben's quote demonstrates that when people receive content on BSMPs, they believe that they are receiving it from another human rather than an algorithm or digital technology, resulting in them associating BSMPs with social presence and intimacy. In comparison, when they receive content on PESM, they may believe that an algorithm rather than a human is suggesting it, resulting in them conversely associating PESM with a lack of social presence.

Sender-oriented personalization, which refers to how BSMPs allow users to engage in targeted communication with specific individuals and groups, also contributes to the perceived intimacy of BSMPs. Participants felt that as BSMPs allow them to reach out to specific

interpersonal ties and begin a conversation, these places foster intimacy, especially compared to PESM. As Cruz said, “[compared to TikTok] WhatsApp feels more intimate. I think if I need to reach my family or a specific person in my life, I feel like I’m more reliably going to get a response than if I reached out to them on a different platform.” Cruz’s quote reflects how the absence of content ranking algorithms on BSMPs makes it easier for users to initiate continuous conversations with specific interpersonal ties as they believe that their message or post will be seen and get a response. This, in turn, results in users associating BSMPs with intimacy.

6.3.2.3 Synchronicity. This idea of continuous conversations and intimacy was also mentioned when participants described how the synchronicity associated with BSMPs contributes to them viewing these places as intimate. For example, Chamomile said that their conversations on private Discord servers and Telegram group chats feel like they are continuous and happening face-to-face, demonstrating how synchronicity is linked to social presence and therefore intimacy:

It feels more like having a conversation *in real life* (emphasis added) with a person. Almost like I forget that there's a record or I don't worry about it in that way or worry about responses because I just say whatever I say, my friends respond, and then we move on.

Similarly, Daya compared communicating via private group chats to being “at a party when you're all sitting together and the responses are instantaneous.” Chamomile and Daya’s accounts align with existing scholarship on how synchronicity is associated with social presence, especially on mobile messaging services (Park & Sundar, 2015). This is because synchronous mediated interactions characterized by immediate feedback resemble the way in which turn-taking typically occurs in face-to-face conversations.

6.3.3 Summary of RQ3 Findings

BSMPs are perceived as intimate as they are associated with social presence and experiencing people's whole self and innermost being, echoing existing conceptualizations of intimacy (Gunawardena, 1995; Hu et al., 2004; Pittman & Reich, 2016). The low visibility associated with BSMPs particularly contributes to this perception as it results in people feeling like they can authentically express themselves within these places in a way that feels similar to face-to-face conversations. In comparison, PESH are associated with idealized self-presentation and inauthenticity. Furthermore, synchronicity and receiver and sender-oriented personalization also contribute to BSMPs being perceived as intimate. The absence of content ranking algorithms facilitates continuous and directed interactions, especially with close interpersonal ties, and it results in people believing that they are receiving content from humans rather than algorithms on BSMPs. This, in turn, contributes to them associating BSMPs with social presence and therefore intimacy.

As noted in Chapter 4, much of the extant scholarship on BSMPs simply describes how users perceive these places as intimate without examining the underlying mechanisms that contribute to this perception. My findings demonstrate that technological features like visibility control mechanisms and the absence of content ranking algorithms as well as social and relational factors like the nature of the audience on BSMPs contribute to users believing that BSMPs *discourage* visibility and *encourage* personalization and synchronicity, which in turn, results in them viewing these places as intimate.

6.4 RQ4: Credibility Evaluation Heuristics on BSMPs

Before outlining the heuristics participants rely on to evaluate the credibility of information on BSMPs, it is important to provide some context and detail the different types of information they engage with and evaluate on BSMPs, including misinformation.

6.4.1 Information Engagement on BSMPs

BSMPs are used to engage with information on a diverse array of topics. As noted above, many participants mentioned being part of private Facebook groups to acquire information and advice about sensitive and emotionally challenging topics like infertility issues, LGBTQIA+ identity, and foster parenting. For example, Andrea discussed her participation in Facebook groups on parenting autistic children: “The way you can get information from a very specific group of people is amazing.” She noted that her participation has been “almost life changing because my children were so unbelievably challenging before we understood what was happening.” She added that acquiring information from these groups has helped her better understand how to address these parenting challenges. This aligns with extant scholarship on how BSMPs like private Facebook groups and Discord servers are used to acquire information about personal and sensitive topics like parenting (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2016; Mansour, 2021). Meanwhile, others described turning to private Facebook groups and Discord servers to gather information about more mundane hobbies and interests like video games, podcasts, Artificial Intelligence art, and as Daya mentioned, gardening: “If I’m doing a gardening thing, I gather a lot of information from a lot of people who post very interesting facts.” This echoes scholarship on how BSMPs are also used to also gather information about hobby and interest-based topics (Deshbandhu & Sahni, 2023).

BSMPs are also used to engage with news articles and information about current events, especially on private mobile messaging group chats comprising of friends and family. In

particular, participants belonging to diasporic and immigrant communities said that they rely on such group chats to stay updated about news from their home countries. For example, Amy Yang noted that she gets “lots of news on China from WeChat,” while Quill described how her extended family group chat on WhatsApp helps her stay up to date with Brazilian political news from a variety of ideological perspectives: “Because our family is large and it has many different points of view, it's a good barometer to see what is happening in Brazil.” This aligns with literature on how the use of BSMPs among immigrant and diasporic communities is associated with the transnational flow of information (Moran et al., 2023). Furthermore, it underscores how mobile messaging services are a key conduit for news sharing across the world, especially in the Global South (Valenzuela et al., 2021). However, as is detailed in the next section, private chats on mobile messaging services as well as BSMPs more generally can also be a conduit for misinformation.

6.4.2 Misinformation on BSMPs

BSMPs are associated with the spread of misinformation on a variety of topics. Echoing existing scholarship (Duffy et al., 2020; Feng et al., 2022; Malhotra, 2020; Rossini, 2023), participants particularly mentioned how misinformation is shared on mobile messaging services. For instance, Alfonso described encountering false information related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in a private group chat with Ukrainian friends on the mobile messaging service Viber: “In that group there was misinformation. People were sharing stories about Ukrainian refugees that were coming from eastern Ukraine, who were Russian speakers, and were actually pro-Russian.” Meanwhile, like many others, Pam noted that misinformation about COVID-19 has been especially common on private chats within WhatsApp: “During the pandemic, there was a

lot of news coming from different areas, and people were sharing [news] which could have been misleading.”

To be sure, BSMPs are not the only places on social media where misinformation is shared; indeed, aligning with the literature on social media and misinformation (Persily & Tucker, 2020; Vosoughi et al., 2018), many participants said that they also regularly encounter false information on PESM. For example, Amy Allen described how her Facebook newsfeed contains algorithmically-suggested content like “Big Pharma is hiding cancer cures because of reasons and you can cure your cancer if you rub yourself with avocado oil five times a day.” She also noted that “if I scroll far enough down on Instagram, you’ll start to see stuff that gets a little sketchy.”

The impact of encountering misinformation on BSMPs may, however, be especially strong. This is because misinformation shared by trusted friends or family members within these places can have a particularly intense effect on one’s emotions and actions. May reflected on this while describing the impact of receiving COVID-19 vaccine-related misinformation from her mother in their family group chat on the mobile messaging service LINE:

When my mom sent the wrong link [misinformation] about the Pfizer vaccine, I definitely got scared because we were scheduled to take the vaccine a few months after I saw that. So, I was like, ‘oh do we really have a choice?’ It really made me rethink my decisions.

May’s quote demonstrates that engaging with misinformation on BSMPs can have real-world consequences because such information often comes from trusted interpersonal ties. Thus, it is vital to gain a detailed understanding of how people evaluate the credibility of information they encounter within these places.

6.4.3 Credibility Evaluation Heuristics

Multiple heuristics, which are mental shortcuts to judge credibility, are used to evaluate the credibility of information on BSMPs. These heuristics are not mutually exclusive and are nested (Metzger et al., 2010; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013); therefore, individuals can rely on more than one heuristic and different heuristics may overlap. As is detailed below, the interviews reveal that the ways in which these heuristics operate are informed by the specific affordances associated with BSMPs.

6.4.3.1 Reputation Heuristic. The *reputation heuristic*, which refers to the idea that people are more likely to view information as credible if it comes from a recognized and familiar source (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013), is used to evaluate the credibility of information on BSMPs. Echoing extant literature on this heuristic (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Klawitter & Hargittai, 2018), some participants said that they focus on whether the information they encounter on BSMPs comes from an authoritative and reputed news organization. For example, Ravi said: “[I look at] the credibility of the source. I certainly trust certain media outlets more than others based on their past history.”

The reputation of the *individual* who is sharing the information on BSMPs, however, was deemed as more important than institutional reputation by many participants. As noted above, the affordances associated with BSMPs, especially the low visibility, result in people viewing BSMPs as places to engage in directed interactions with close friends and family. Participants said that they consider these close ties to be reputed sources because of their interpersonal familiarity with them, especially compared to strangers who post information on PESM. Erica illustrated this while describing why she trusts information within private chats on mobile messaging services:

I know the people who are messaging me on my apps. And I pretty much know most of them since before they were born. And I know that what they're telling me is what's happening. Somebody else I've never met before, I don't know.

This demonstrates how the *liking/agreement heuristic*, which refers to how people view information shared by an individual that they like and are familiar with as more credible (Chaiken, 1987), underpins the *reputation heuristic* on BSMPs.

Interpersonal familiarity also plays a role in credibility evaluation on private groups and servers organized around shared interests and activities. While these BSMPs are not associated with close friends or family members, participants stated that individuals' posting history and their interactions with them over time help to build interpersonal familiarity and trust. For example, Johnny said that they trust information shared by members of a private Makerspace Slack channel composed of people interested in digital and computing technologies because "based on the interactions I've personally had with them, I'm gonna give them the benefit of the doubt more than I would have somebody just off the street. And things like Facebook, Imgur, Reddit are the equivalent of on the street." Andrea also described how such trust can develop at a group rather than individual level, saying that she trusts information posted in certain private Facebook groups because she can keep "an eye on them over time" and "get a sense of what sorts of things happen in that group." This echoes Moser et al.'s (2017) findings regarding how trust can develop within private Facebook groups.

This is not to say that *every* individual who shares information on BSMPs is viewed as trustworthy. For example, some participants revealed that despite their interpersonal familiarity with the older family members they interact with on BSMPs, they did not always view information shared by them as credible. As Zoe noted, "I feel like my mom and older people

consume so much misinformation. The things they share with me, I immediately know that it's not true.” This echoes previous work that finds that younger generations perceive that their older counterparts are more vulnerable to misinformation than them (Malhotra, 2022).

However, overall, as BSMPs *discourage* visibility, they facilitate directed interactions with close interpersonal ties or people with shared interests, allowing for the development of interpersonal familiarity and trust. This also relates to the perceived intimacy of BSMPs. As discussed in Section 6.3, BSMPs are associated with authentically expressing oneself, which allows people to build such trust and familiarity. This, in turn, leads to them viewing information shared on BSMPs as credible, especially compared to information posted by strangers on PESM.

6.4.3.2 Endorsement Heuristic. The *endorsement heuristic*, which refers to the phenomenon where people view information as credible when they perceive that others think it is credible (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013; Sundar, 2008a), also plays a role in credibility evaluation on BSMPs. While extant scholarship on this heuristic focuses on how people rely on explicit and visible endorsement cues in the form of likes and/or comments on PESM (Jessen & Jørgensen, 2011; Li et al., 2020; Mena et al., 2020), the endorsement heuristic operates in a more implicit and passive way on BSMPs.

On BSMPs, people do not typically rely on visible endorsement cues. Instead, there is an expectation that false information on BSMPs will be corrected; thus, the lack of a correction in response to a piece of information is viewed as a tacit endorsement of that information's credibility. For example, Zoe stated that if she shares misinformation on BSMPs, her friends will “just say that's not true.” Reflecting on her credibility evaluation process, she emphasized that “I have other people to remind me that not everything I see is true.” Similarly, Cesar revealed that if misinformation is posted on his private Telegram group chat with friends, he expects that

“people will go dig into it, come back to the group chat with evidence and be like, ‘hey, just so you know, that was fabricated or misconstrued.’” He underscored that people are more likely to engage in such corrections on BSMPs compared to PESM because there is a “mutual contract of trust” on BSMPs, and no one is calling “you out in a public place for posting something that’s incorrect.” This demonstrates how the low visibility associated with BSMPs contributes to the expectation that misinformation will be corrected within these places. This, in turn, results in people viewing the absence of a correction as a tacit endorsement of the credibility of a post or message. This expectation that misinformation will be corrected on BSMPs aligns with Rossini et al.’s (2021) work on how people are more likely to be exposed to misinformation corrections on WhatsApp compared to Facebook. It also echoes Tandoc et al.’s (2018) findings on how individuals often rely on passive information authentication strategies on social media, including expecting interpersonal ties to correct misinformation.

This reliance on tacit endorsements also characterizes credibility evaluation on interest-based private groups and servers, where there is an expectation that misinformation will be corrected or even removed by administrators. Andrea mentioned this in relation to private Facebook groups: “In the private groups, the admins will pay more attention to what’s posted. And if something is obviously ridiculous, it gets removed.” This indicates that there is a great degree of responsibility on administrators to ensure that misinformation is not shared within private Facebook groups and Discord servers, even as they occupy this role voluntarily and are not compensated for their labor (Bajpai et al., 2022; Jiang et al., 2019; Malinen, 2021).

Thus, overall, some participants revealed that they expect misinformation to be corrected or even removed on BSMPs. The low visibility associated with BSMPs contributes to this

expectation. This expectation, in turn, results in the participants viewing the absence of a corrective response or removal as a tacit endorsement of the information's credibility.

6.4.3.3 Identity Heuristic. Participants also described relying on the *identity heuristic* to evaluate the credibility of information on BSMPs. As noted in Chapter 4, this refers to the idea that people view information as credible when they perceive that they have personal agency over customizing their information environment (Sundar, 2008a, 2008b). The receiver-oriented personalization associated with BSMPs triggers the identity heuristic, resulting in users viewing information shared within these places as credible, especially compared to PESM.

As noted in Section 6.2.2 on personalization, participants emphasized that they have control over personalizing their information environment on BSMPs. Many of them also underscored that they believe in themselves to personalize a *credible* information environment on BSMPs. Referring to engaging with information on private Slack workspaces, Ben stated that “I just think of it as keeping good company. I don't hang around with people who I think are vulnerable with that stuff [misinformation].” Similarly, Chamomile said about her Telegram group chat with friends: “We wouldn't want to be around the kind of person who would share false stuff genuinely. So, I trust the private spaces because I feel like we've kind of filtered for a trustworthy type of person.” Thus, these participants view information on BSMPs as credible because these places allow them to restrict their audience to only people who they believe would share credible information. May reflected on how this compares to PESM, where people lack such agency and information is algorithmically curated to maximize engagement: “I think Twitter doesn't do a very good job of filtering the real news from the fake news. It's more driven by interactions.” In comparison, she noted that “on iMessage, it's a lot more filtered down” and therefore you are “less likely to find misinformation.” She further added that the people she

interacts with on iMessage typically share information from reliable sources and therefore the content she receives on this service is “filtered down” to factually accurate information. These quotes echo Masip et al.’s (2021) study, which found that the receiver-oriented personalization associated with WhatsApp contributes to users viewing information shared on this service, especially in private chats with close interpersonal ties, as credible.

Participants also said that they believe in their ability to self-select into credible interest-based private groups and servers. For example, Andrea said that she trusts information on private Facebook groups about parenting autistic children “because I picked them [the specific groups]. I think that matters a lot, right? There’s a million autism focus groups I can pick but I picked these specific ones.” This contradicts Mansour and Francke’s (2017) findings from their study on a Facebook mothering group. They found that their interview participants did not believe they had self-selected into a credible group and remained part of the group to maintain social connections rather than to acquire credible information.

Thus, overall, the personal agency people have to personalize their information environment on BSMPs triggers the identity heuristic, resulting in them viewing information shared within these places as credible. This aligns with existing scholarship on the link between the identity heuristic and the agency model of customization (Sundar, 2008b; Sundar & Marathe, 2010). The agency model of customization suggests that when users have agency over customizing their information environment in mediated spaces, it results in them believing that their content gatekeeping choices reflect their personal identity. The interviews demonstrate that on BSMPs, people’s identities are tied to the belief that they surround themselves with interpersonal ties and/or people with shared interests who share credible information.

6.4.3.4 Persuasive Intent Heuristic. The personalization associated with BSMPs also informs users' reliance on the *persuasive intent heuristic* while evaluating the credibility of information within these places. As noted in Chapter 4, this heuristic refers to the idea that information perceived as biased and meant to persuade or manipulate is deemed less credible (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). According to participants, as BSMPs are associated with receiver and sender-oriented personalization, people typically share information within these places because it is relevant to a group and/or an individual rather than to manipulate or persuade anyone. This results in BSMPs being associated with a *lack* of persuasive intent, which in turn, contributes to people viewing information shared within these places as credible. For example, Anders said:

I think people there [on BSMPs] don't have the same general desire to get attention. There's already the assumption that if anyone is interested, they'll talk about it and we have an idea of what each other are interested in.

He further stated that because people are driven by a desire to share information that is relevant to others rather than to gain attention on BSMPs, it makes him less skeptical of information shared within these places.

Some participants also compared BSMPs to PESM, emphasizing that the latter are associated with persuasive intent, and consequently, less credible information. For instance, Matthew noted that he believes that people who publicly post on Instagram are motivated “to make money, primarily.” In comparison, “when you're in a private space, the economics are not feasible” and people share information “because they think it's important, and because they think that the specific person could use it.” Matthew's views regarding PESM echo extant research on how the persuasive intent heuristic is often triggered when people believe they are being exposed

to advertising (Fransen & Fennis, 2014; Klawitter & Hargittai, 2018). His quote also relates to the findings for RQ1 regarding how PESM are associated with consuming advertising-related content.

Overall, BSMPs are associated with sending and receiving relevant and personalized content rather than content that aims to manipulate or persuade. This results in some participants viewing information shared within these places as credible, especially compared to PESM.

6.4.3.5 Accountability Heuristic. While the heuristics mentioned above have been identified in existing scholarship on information credibility evaluation (Chaiken, 1987; Klawitter & Hargittai, 2018; Metzger et al., 2010; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013), many participants also discussed relying on an emergent heuristic that I label the *accountability heuristic*. This refers to the idea that when individuals believe that people feel a sense of accountability or responsibility toward sharing credible information within a certain mediated space or place, they associate that space or place with credible information. Some participants believed that people feel this sense of accountability on BSMPs, especially while sharing information with close interpersonal ties. As May noted, when people share information with family and friends on BSMPs, “everyone at least has that thought [to make sure the information is accurate] before sending it. Because it's to someone you personally know, you care they get the right information or not.” Meanwhile, Matthew compared accountability on BSMPs to PESM and indicated that there is a greater emotional weight attached to misleading interpersonal ties on BSMPs, resulting in people feeling accountable for sharing credible information within these places. He said that “putting something out in public is not lying to anyone specifically.” In comparison, he viewed sharing false information directly with close ties on BSMPs as “lying to somebody” specifically because “it is more intimate. It feels more of a direct attack on the honesty of the relationship.” Thus, as the

affordances of BSMPs contribute to these places being used to interact with close interpersonal ties, people may believe that individuals feel accountable for sharing credible information on BSMPs as they do not want to mislead those close to them. This perception, in turn, can result in people viewing information shared within these places as credible, especially compared to PESM.

On the other hand, for some participants, BSMPs are associated with a lack of accountability for sharing credible information, resulting in them distrusting information shared within these places. This was particularly an issue for some WhatsApp users, who emphasized that the ability to forward messages without retaining the original source identity on WhatsApp diminishes accountability. When users forward messages from one chat to another on WhatsApp, the identity of the original author of the message is not displayed. Manaal argued that this means that there is a lower social cost to sharing misinformation on WhatsApp because “the identity disappears as soon as you start forwarding it. So, no one really needs to know where it came from.” This demonstrates how the low visibility of people-to-content associations on BSMPs like private chats on WhatsApp can impact information credibility evaluation. Furthermore, this aligns with scholarship on how the ability to forward messages without retaining the original source identity contributes to the spread of misinformation on WhatsApp (Farooq, 2017; Pasquetto et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, for some participants, PESM rather than BSMPs are associated with a high degree of accountability for sharing credible information. Sarah discussed this while reflecting on her own experience of sharing information on PESM, stating that when she shares information on Twitter and Instagram, she is “accountable for sharing wrong information with a much larger audience.” This informs her belief that, in comparison, BSMPs are associated with a

lack of accountability because “it's easier to send stuff without doing your research on private messaging apps.” Others stressed that accountability is higher on PESM because there is a greater chance that one will be corrected for sharing misinformation and people want to avoid being publicly challenged. Daya noted that when individuals post publicly on their Facebook profile, they feel a sense of accountability because “people comment” and therefore “there has to be some integrity there.” This is in contrast to the participants mentioned in Section 6.4.3.2 who discussed relying on tacit endorsements on BSMPs because they expect misinformation to be corrected within these places.

Thus, overall, the perception that people feel accountable for sharing credible information within a specific mediated space or place impacts information credibility evaluation on both BSMPs and PESM. When people associate a mediated space or place with this sense of accountability, they also associate it with credible information. Some participants argued that such accountability is higher on BSMPs compared to PESM because people do not want to mislead the close ties they interact with on BSMPs. Meanwhile, others made the opposite argument, citing factors like the absence of original source identity while forwarding messages on WhatsApp and the greater chance that one will be corrected for sharing misinformation on PESM.

6.4.4 Summary of RQ4 Findings

BSMPs are used to engage with news and information on diverse topics and can also be conduits for the spread of misinformation. To evaluate the credibility of information shared on BSMPs, people rely on multiple, often overlapping, heuristics. Many participants revealed that they view information shared on BSMPs as credible, especially compared to information shared on PESM. Reasons for this perception include their interpersonal familiarity with the individuals

they interact with on BSMPs and the expectation that false information will be corrected or removed within these places. Some participants also emphasized that they believe they have personal agency over curating a credible information environment on BSMPs and that people share information on BSMPs because it is relevant to others rather than to persuade or manipulate anyone. These heuristics align with the existing literature on information credibility evaluation heuristics (Chaiken, 1987; Klawitter & Hargittai, 2018; Metzger et al., 2010; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013); however, the ways in which they operate are informed by the affordances and perceived intimacy associated with BSMPs. The interviews also reveal that the perceived accountability of sharing credible information within a specific mediated space or place is an emergent heuristic that users rely on to evaluate information credibility on BSMPs and PESM. For some, this sense of accountability is greater on BSMPs, resulting in them associating these places with credible information, while others associate PESM with greater accountability, and consequently, more credible information.

A key finding from these interviews is that many participants compared the credibility of information across BSMPs and PESM and highlighted how they view information shared on BSMPs as more credible. To be sure, some participants said that they associate PESM with more credible information, while others said that they see no differences in information credibility across BSMPs and PESM. However, overall, the fact that BSMPs *discourage* visibility, *encourage* personalization, and are perceived as intimate resulted in many, though not all, participants viewing information shared on BSMPs as more credible. To further explore this potential difference between credibility evaluation on BSMPs and PESM, I conducted an experiment that is detailed in the next chapter.

Chapter 7: Quantitative Credibility Study

To further understand the potential differences between credibility evaluation on BSMPs and PESM highlighted in the qualitative findings, I conducted an online experiment. In this experiment, I manipulated the affordance of visibility and examined the relationship between visibility, intimacy, and credibility. In a 2x2 experiment, participants were shown a post about cancer treatment or houseplants on either a private group on a Facebook-like fictional social media platform, with the group described as not being publicly searchable and only containing members approved by an administrator, or on a public group on the same platform, described as a group that can be found through search and is accessible to anyone. Here, the private group represents BSMPs (low visibility), while the public group represents PESM (high visibility). After seeing the post, participants were asked to assess its credibility and answer questions regarding the perceived intimacy of private/public groups on this fictional platform. In my analysis, I compare BSMPs and PESM and examine how visibility affects credibility as well as how perceived intimacy shapes this effect. I find that perceived intimacy mediates the relationship between visibility and credibility. Specifically, lower visibility leads to higher perceived intimacy, which in turn, leads to higher credibility.

In Section 7.2, I outline the research question and hypotheses I address through this experiment, and in Section 7.3, I provide a detailed description of the experiment, including the nature of the manipulation, the stimuli and measures used, and the experiment design and procedure. However, before this, it is important to reflect on how I combine the qualitative study detailed in the previous chapters with this quantitative experiment and adopt a mixed methods approach.

7.1 Mixing Methods

In combining my qualitative interviews with a quantitative experiment, I adopt a mixed methods approach in this dissertation. Although numerous definitions of mixed methods research exist, a central tenet of such research is the mixing of qualitative and quantitative strands in the research process (Creamer, 2017; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). In this dissertation, I adopt a sequential exploratory mixed methods design, which refers to mixed methods studies wherein the quantitative phase follows the qualitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This design is amenable to exploring new phenomena and theory building (Creswell et al., 2003). Thus, this is a suitable design for a dissertation that introduces, defines and explores a new concept, namely bounded social media places.

It is also important to clarify my purpose for adopting a mixed methods approach. Drawing on Creamer's (2017) typology of purposes for using mixed methods, my dissertation is associated with the *development* purpose, which refers to when insights from using one method inform the design of the other method. Some key insights from the qualitative interviews contributed to the design of the quantitative experiment. While the experiment design and research question and hypotheses are described in much more detail in the forthcoming sections, it is important to briefly mention the main ways in which these aspects were informed by insights from the interviews. First, in describing how they evaluate the credibility of information on BSMPs, many interview participants made comparisons with PESM and stated that they view information shared on BSMPs as more credible than information shared on PESM. The experiment focuses on this comparison and involves comparing the credibility ascribed to the same post on a private group, which represents BSMPs, and a public group, which represents PESM. Second, the interview findings revealed that both visibility and perceived intimacy impact information credibility evaluation. The research question and hypotheses for the

experiment focus on the relationship between visibility, perceived intimacy, and credibility across BSMPs and PESM. Third, the interview participants said that people use BSMPs to discuss a variety of topics, including both emotionally intense and mundane issues. Informed by this insight, the experimental stimuli cover diverse topics as participants were either shown a post on cancer treatment, which is an emotionally intense topic, or houseplants, which is a more mundane topic (see Figure 2 and Figure 3 below).

Furthermore, my dissertation is also associated with the *complementarity* purpose for using mixed methods, which refers to adopting a mixed methods approach to gain broader and more holistic insights about a phenomenon (Creamer, 2017; Greene et al., 1989). Adopting an interpretive qualitative approach for my interviews and complementing it with a quantitative experiment to test hypotheses helps me achieve this purpose. This is because, as is detailed in Chapter 5, even as the interviews present insights into how people make sense of their credibility evaluation process on BSMPs, the paradigmatic assumptions associated with qualitative research preclude me from making strong causal claims. Through the experiment, I address this issue and highlight the factors that affect the credibility evaluation process on BSMPs and examine how this compares to PESM. Thus, having both interpretive and causal findings allows me to present a more holistic and multi-faceted understanding of information credibility evaluation on BSMPs. As Small (2011) notes, “researchers have used complementary designs when they are reluctant to limit the kind of knowledge gained to that which a type of data can produce” (p. 64).

Finally, adopting a mixed methods approach involves mixing at multiple stages of the research process. As noted above, I engaged in mixing while designing the experiment and framing the quantitative research question and hypotheses as these processes were informed by insights from the interviews. As is detailed at the end of this chapter, I also engage in mixing at

the interpretation stage by presenting meta-inferences that integrate the qualitative and quantitative findings (Creamer, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008).

7.2 Quantitative Study Research Question and Hypotheses

As outlined in the previous chapter, many of the interview participants highlighted how the low visibility associated with BSMPs contributes to them viewing information shared on BSMPs as more credible than information shared on PESM. In particular, the low visibility associated with BSMPs facilitates the development of interpersonal trust and familiarity, resulting in people associating these places with credible information. To be sure, the personalization associated with BSMPs also contributes to people believing that information shared within these places is more credible. However, visibility is a root affordance (Flyverbom et al., 2016). It underpins affordances like personalization and meaningfully distinguishes BSMPs from PESM. As is detailed in the RQ3 findings, visibility is also closely linked to the perceived intimacy of BSMPs, which impacts information credibility evaluation.

Thus, overall, visibility is a suitable affordance to manipulate to compare credibility evaluation across BSMPs and PESM. Furthermore, while many of the interview participants said that they view information shared on BSMPs as more credible than information shared on PESM, some argued the opposite, and some believed that there are no differences in credibility across BSMPs and PESM. Based on these insights, in this experiment, I manipulate the affordance of visibility and compare message credibility across the high and low visibility conditions, addressing the following research question:

RQ5: Is there a statistically significant difference in message credibility for the same message between the high and low visibility conditions?

Further, many interview participants noted that one of the factors that contributes to them associating BSMPs with credibility is that these places are intimate and facilitate genuine and authentic interactions. This echoes speculation from scholars that the perceived intimacy of BSMPs may result in users having a “false sense of confidence in the information shared” within these places (Masip et al., 2021, p. 1068). This relationship between perceived intimacy and credibility has also been discussed within the context of other mediated channels. In this work, scholars have drawn on the link between social presence and intimacy. As social presence is associated with salience or realness (Short et al., 1976), people view a channel as more credible if it engenders social presence (Pittman & Reich, 2016; Sundar, 2008a; Reich & Pittman, 2019). As noted in Section 6.3, many participants highlighted how the low visibility associated with BSMPs informs their belief that these places engender social presence and therefore intimacy, especially compared to PESM.

Based on these interview findings and extant literature, I posit that BSMPs are perceived as more intimate than PESM, which in turn, results in people viewing information on BSMPs as more credible. Thus, through this experiment, I test the following hypotheses:

H1: There will be a statistically significant difference in perceived intimacy between the high and low visibility conditions. Specifically, the low visibility condition will be perceived as more intimate than high visibility condition.

H2: Perceived intimacy mediates the relationship between visibility and message credibility. Specifically, lower visibility leads to higher perceived intimacy, which in turn, leads to higher message credibility.

7.3 Quantitative Study Method

7.3.1 Pilot Studies

Before the main experiment, two pilot studies were conducted ($N=80$ for each study). This was done after the university's IRB declared the experiment as exempt. Participants were recruited through the online recruitment platform Prolific. To be included in the study, participants needed to be adults residing in the U.S. who used at least once social media platform regularly (defined by Prolific as at least once a month). For the first pilot, these platforms included: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Reddit, Snapchat and TikTok. For the second pilot and the main experiment, the sample was restricted to U.S.-based adults who at least used Facebook regularly. This was done because the fictional social media platform created for the experimental stimuli was most similar to Facebook. Furthermore, Facebook is a social media platform that contains both PESM in the form of public "newsfeeds," groups, and pages, as well as BSMPs like private and private hidden groups as well as private chats on Facebook Messenger. Participants were paid \$3 for 15 minutes in the first pilot and \$2 for 10 minutes in the second pilot (based on Prolific's suggested rate of \$12/hour). Unlike crowdsourcing platforms like MTurk, Prolific is geared toward research and provides clear guidelines to researchers and participants regarding fair compensation (Palan & Schitter, 2018). However, as Palan and Schitter note, there are also limitations associated with using platforms like Prolific to conduct online experiments. First, there are issues regarding the verification of identity and participants could potentially create multiple accounts and participate in a study more than once. Second, unlike lab experiments, in online experiments that rely on these online crowdsourcing platforms, researchers have little control over the participants' environment and level of distraction. Third, as Turner et al. (2020) observe, the participant pool on Prolific is dominated by White, educated, and highly technologically competent participants, limiting the diversity of the sample.

This online experiment was designed on Qualtrics and participants were sent a link on Prolific, with a message stating that they could participate in a study exploring communication behavior on social media. Once they consented to participate in the study, participants were randomly assigned across four conditions. This included two low visibility conditions (to represent BSMPs), where participants were told that they were part of a private cancer awareness group on a fictional social media platform called GroupConnect and shown a post related to a successful cancer treatment trial or a post on the link between antiperspirants and cancer. There were also two high visibility conditions (to represent PESM), where participants were told that they were part of a public cancer awareness group on GroupConnect and shown one of the two posts mentioned above. Thus, the four conditions were low visibility-cancer treatment, low visibility-antiperspirant, high visibility-cancer treatment, and high visibility-antiperspirant. More details about the experiment procedure and design, including the instructions and stimuli shown to participants in the main experiment, are presented in the next section. Here, it is important to note that the posts shown to participants in the pilot studies and main experiment are factually accurate. There are ethical issues associated with exposing participants to misinformation during experiments (Barnfield, 2022). Even if participants are debriefed and presented factually accurate information after the experiment, there is a danger that the false information will stick in their memory due to the continued influence effect (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Furthermore, my research question and hypotheses focus on information credibility evaluation more generally rather than specifically focusing on how people evaluate the credibility of misinformation. Thus, I decided to use factually accurate information in my stimuli for the pilot as well as the main experiment.

The results from these pilot studies informed the design of the main experiment. First, there was a concern that only focusing on cancer awareness did not reflect the different types of information people encounter on BSMPs. As detailed in Chapter 6, the interviews revealed that people use BSMPs to discuss both emotionally challenging topics like health and identity as well as more mundane interest and hobby-related topics like gardening and podcasts. Thus, for the main experiment, I decided to diversify the topics. This involved replacing the antiperspirant conditions with low and high visibility conditions where participants were asked to imagine that they were part of a private/public group about houseplants. Second, to underscore the main manipulation of visibility, participants were reminded that they were viewing a post in a private or public group in the wording of the items used to measure the manipulation check, issue involvement, and message credibility. For instance, in the pilot studies, one of the items for message credibility was worded as “the post is accurate,” with participants indicating the extent to which they agreed with the statement from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. For the main experiment, this statement was changed to “the post in the **private/public group** is accurate.” Third, the reliability of the issue involvement measure in the pilot studies was found to be low. To address this issue, I clarified the wording of the items for this measure. For example, in the first pilot study, one of the items was worded as “the issue mentioned in the post is important,” with participants indicating the extent to which they agreed with the statement from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. For the main experiment, this item was changed to “The issue mentioned in the private group post is important **to me**.”

7.3.2 Main Experiment

For the main experiment, participants were again recruited through Prolific. The sample was limited to adults residing in the U.S. who at least used Facebook regularly (defined by

Prolific as at least once a month). Participants were paid \$2 for the ten minutes it took to complete the experiment (based on Prolific's suggested rate of \$12/hour). They were sent a link to complete the experiment on Qualtrics, with a message stating that they could participate in a study exploring communication behavior on social media. Data were collected between October 2022 and January 2023, with the final dataset consisting of 240 participants (after removal of participants who had failed to complete the study). In terms of demographics, 146 identified as women, 91 as men, 1 as nonbinary, and 1 as genderqueer (1 participant did not disclose their gender). Further, 68.3% were White, 8.8% were Asian or Asian-American, 6.7% were Hispanic or Latino, 5% were Black or African-American, and 11.3% did not disclose their race. It is important to note that for both race and gender, participants were allowed to check multiple options. Further, the mean age was 36.01, $SD = 12.95$, ranging from 18-77. As noted above, the participant pool on Prolific is predominantly White and lacks diversity. This is reflected in the demographics of my sample.

7.3.3 Experiment Design

In a 2x2 between subjects design, the level of visibility (low vs high) and topic (cancer vs plants) were manipulated. Thus, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions (low visibility-cancer topic, low visibility-plants topic, high visibility-cancer topic, or high visibility-plants topic). They were told to imagine that they were part of a private group (low visibility) or public group (high visibility) named Cancer Awareness and Information (cancer topic) or Houseplants Discussion and Information (plant topic) on a fictional Facebook-like social media platform called GroupConnect. They were shown a factually accurate post within that group (see Figure 2 and Figure 3 for the post used for each topic) and asked to respond to

questions related to the manipulation check, message credibility, issue involvement, perceived intimacy of channel, and demographic variables (see measures below).

7.3.4 Experiment Procedure

On clicking the Qualtrics link on Prolific, participants viewed a welcome page and were subsequently asked to answer two validation questions about where they resided and the social media platforms they regularly used. This was done to ensure that they met the sample criteria. Those who met the criteria were then shown a consent form and asked to indicate their agreement to participate in the study. Those who agreed read an instruction page that was designed to manipulate visibility. The design of this manipulation was informed by Neubaum's (2016) manipulation of publicness and Facebook's settings for private hidden and public groups. Participants in either of the low visibility conditions were told to imagine that they were part of a private group on GroupConnect that could only be accessed by group members and required administrator approval and an invitation by an existing member to join. Further, group posts and comments were described as being only visible to other group members. Meanwhile, participants in either of the high visibility conditions were told to imagine that they were part of a public group on GroupConnect that could be accessed by anyone. Further, group posts and comments were described as being visible to both members and non-members (see Appendix E for full instructions for both low and high visibility conditions).

After reading these instructions, depending on the condition they were assigned to, participants were shown a factually accurate post about a successful cancer treatment trial in a Cancer Awareness and Information private/public group or a factually accurate post about how houseplants can help reduce noise pollution in a Houseplants Information and Discussion

private/public group (see Figure 2 and Figure 3 below for examples and Appendix F for all the stimuli used).

Figure 2

Post Shown to Participants in the Low Visibility-Cancer Topic Condition

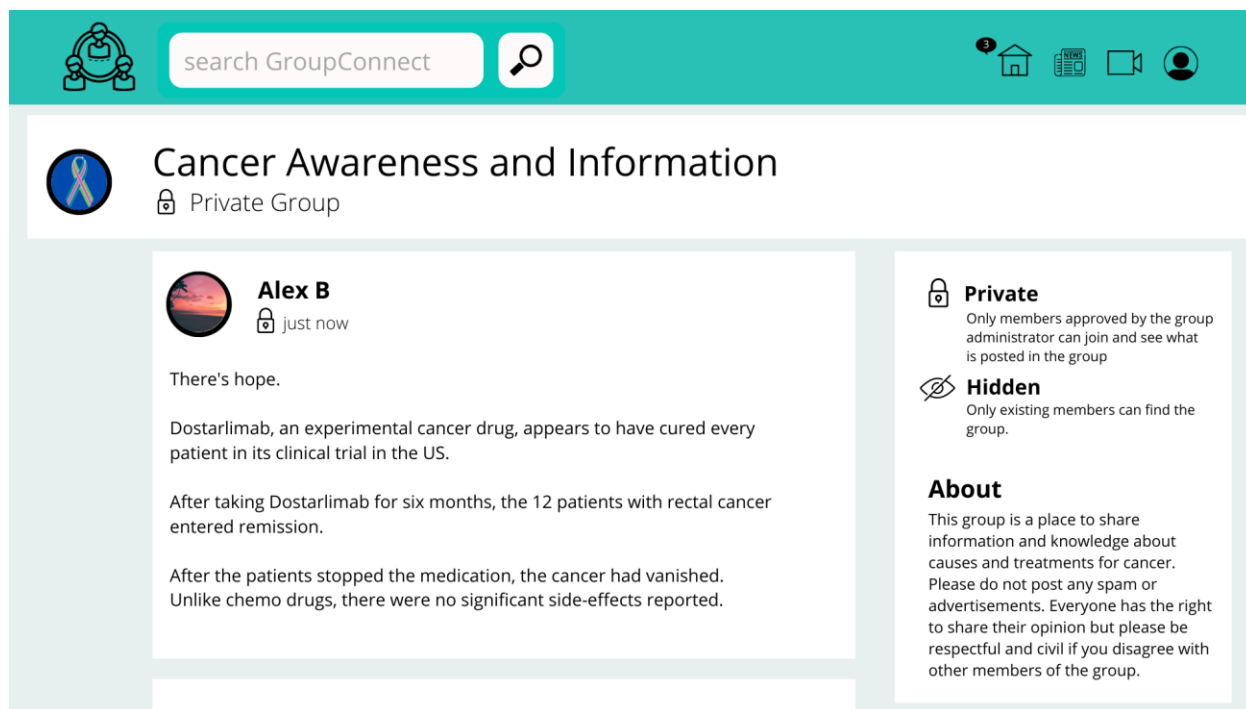
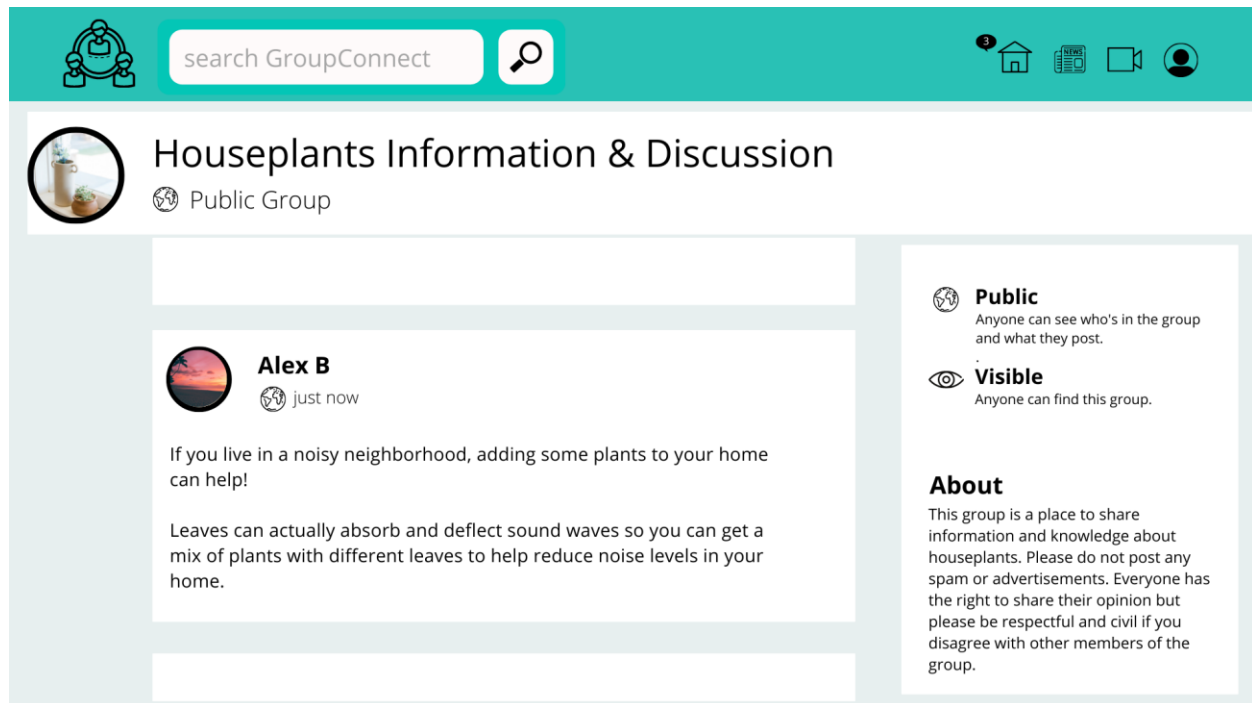


Figure 3

Post Shown to Participants in the High Visibility-Plants Topic Condition



To mitigate the effect of the poster’s identity on message credibility, I used a gender-neutral name for the poster and a display picture that does not contain any indicator regarding the poster’s identity. Further, since likes and comments (or lack thereof) can trigger the bandwagon heuristic and impact credibility assessment (Sundar, 2008), the timestamp on each post was shown to be “just now” to explain the absence of likes or comments. Across the high and low visibility conditions, except for the description of the visibility settings, content for each topic was equivalent. In other words, the only difference between the low visibility-cancer topic and high visibility-cancer topic or the low visibility-plants topic and high visibility-plants topic conditions was whether the group was described as public or private. All other content, including the post, poster name and display picture, and the “About” section for the groups was kept

equivalent. After viewing one of these four stimuli, participants responded to questions related to the following measures.

7.3.5 Measures

7.3.5.1 Manipulation Check. To check if the manipulation for visibility was successful, I drew on Neubaum's (2016) manipulation check for publicness. Participants were asked to estimate on a 7-point scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*, the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: 1) The post in the private/public group is open for anyone on the internet to see, 2) the post in the private/public group is easy to access for anyone on the internet, and 3) the post in the private group is easily searchable for anyone on the internet ($\alpha = .98$, $M = 4.10$, $SD = 2.60$).

7.2.5.2 Message Credibility. Message credibility was measured by utilizing the scale constructed and validated by Appelman and Sundar (2016). They found that message credibility is associated with accuracy, authenticity, and believability and proposed a three-item scale ($\alpha = .87$). Thus, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) with the following three statements: 1) The post in the private/public group is accurate, 2) The post in the private/public group is authentic, and 3) The post in the private/public group is believable. The mean of the 3 items was computed for analysis ($\alpha = .88$, $M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.28$).

7.3.5.3 Perceived Intimacy of Channel. Perceived intimacy of the channel was measured by drawing on the three-item scale constructed by Pittman (2017), adapted from the qualitative responses obtained by Pittman and Reich (2016). While Pittman (2017) focused on the perceived intimacy of specific social media platforms ($\alpha(\text{Twitter}) = .895$, $\alpha(\text{Instagram}) = .879$, $\alpha(\text{Snapchat}) = .864$, $\alpha(\text{Texting}) = .886$, $\alpha(\text{Facebook}) = .862$), in this experiment, depending

on which condition they were assigned to, participants were asked about the perceived intimacy of private or public groups on GroupConnect. This was done to compare the perceived intimacy of BSMPs (low visibility private groups) to the perceived intimacy of PESM (high visibility public groups). Participants were asked to respond to the following statements on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*): 1) Private/public groups on GroupConnect would be a good way to stay in touch with people, 2) Private/public groups on GroupConnect would help me feel more connected to others, and 3) When I use private/public groups on GroupConnect, I would feel close to people. The mean of the 3 items was computed for analysis ($\alpha = .89$, $M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.28$).

7.3.5.4 Issue Involvement. Issue involvement has been found to affect credibility evaluation (Metzger et al., 2003). Therefore, participants' issue involvement was measured to control for this effect by drawing on Lee and Kim's (2016) measure ($\alpha = .80$). On a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), participants were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statements: 1) The issue mentioned in the private/public group post is personally relevant to me, 2) The issue mentioned in the private/public group post is important to me, and 3) The issue mentioned in the private/public group post is interesting to me. The mean of the 3 items was computed for analysis ($\alpha = .76$, $M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.97$).

7.3.5.5 Demographic Characteristics. Participants were asked to indicate their age, education level, gender, and race. For age, participants were asked "What is your age? (in years)" and responded by typing in a number ($M = 36.01$, $SD = 12.95$).

For education level, they were asked: "What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?" and chose from the following option: 1) Less than high school (Grades 1-8 or no formal schooling), 2) High school incomplete (Grades

9-11 or Grade 12 with NO diploma), 3) High school graduate (Grade 12 with diploma or GED certificate), 4) Some college, no degree (includes some community college), 5) Two-year associate degree from a college or university, 6) Four-year college or university degree/Bachelor's degree (e.g., BS, BA, AB), 7) Some postgraduate or professional schooling, no postgraduate degree (e.g. some graduate school), 8) Postgraduate or professional degree, including master's, doctorate, medical or law degree (e.g., MA, MS, PhD, MD, JD), 9) Don't know, and 10) Refused (1 = 1.3%, 2 = 0.8%, 3 = 12.1%, 4 = 21.7%, 5 = 11.7%, 6 = 33.8%, 7 = 5%, 8 = 13.3%, 9 = 0.4%).

To indicate their race, they were asked: Which of the following describes your race? You can select as many as apply. They chose from: 1) White, 2) Black or African-American, 3) Asian or Asian-American, 4) Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native, 5) Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian, 6) Hispanic/Latino, 7) Don't know, and 8) Some other race (racial distribution of sample is noted above). These measures for age, education, and race are based on measures used in a 2019 Pew Research Center survey on mobile phone and broadband use in the U.S. (Anderson, 2019).

To indicate their gender, participants were asked: "What is your gender?" and picked from the following options: 1) woman, 2) man, 3) nonbinary, 4) prefer not to disclose, and 5) prefer to self-describe. Participants were allowed to check more than one option and if they checked the prefer to self-describe option, a text box appeared for them to type in their response. This measure for gender is based on Spiel et al.'s (2019) recommendations. The gender and racial makeup of the sample for the main experiment was noted above in Section 7.3.2.

7.4 Quantitative Study Findings

7.4.1 Manipulation Check and Preliminary Analyses

To check if the manipulation was successful, participants were asked to respond to questions regarding the visibility of the post in the private group (for the low visibility condition) or public group (for the high visibility condition). An independent-sample *t*-test confirmed that the visibility manipulation was successful. The posts in the high visibility conditions ($M = 6.52$, $SD = 0.62$) were rated as significantly more visible than the posts in the low visibility conditions ($M = 1.63$, $SD = 1.05$), $t(238) = -43.90$, $p < .001$.

As noted above, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions (low visibility-cancer topic, low visibility-plants topic, high visibility-cancer topic, or high visibility-plants topic). For each RQ and hypothesis, I present the findings for each topic (coded as 0 = *cancer*, 1 = *plants*) before comparing high and low visibility conditions across topics for the entire sample.

Furthermore, before the main analysis, I checked if age and education, which are basic demographic variables that may potentially impact credibility assessment, needed to be included as covariates in the analysis and if there was demographic statistical equivalence between the conditions. Results showed that there was no significant difference between the high visibility and low visibility conditions on participants' age ($t(238) = -0.66$, $p = .51$) and education ($\chi^2(8) = 7.58$, $p = .48$). There was also no significant difference in age ($t(238) = 0.93$, $p = .35$) and education ($\chi^2(8) = 3.34$, $p = .91$) across the two different topics. Thus, these variables were not used as covariates in the analysis. As noted above, issue involvement is known to affect credibility evaluation (Metzger et al., 2003). Furthermore, issue involvement could also potentially impact perceived intimacy as people may view groups centered on issues that are relevant, important, and interesting to them as more intimate. Thus, I control for issue involvement in my analysis.

Table 3*Means and Standard Deviations for Key Variables*

	Low Visibility (Private Group)			High Visibility (Public Group)		
	Cancer	Plants	Entire Sample	Cancer	Plants	Entire Sample
Message Credibility	3.88 (1.20)	4.66 (1.20)	4.27 (1.26)	3.78 (1.19)	5.03 (1.12)	4.41 (1.31)
Issue Involvement	3.05 (0.96)	3.02 (0.93)	3.03 (0.94)	3.18 (0.89)	2.98 (1.10)	3.08 (1.00)
Perceived Intimacy	4.81 (1.29)	5.23 (0.98)	5.03 (1.16)	4.39 (1.42)	4.90 (1.26)	4.65 (1.36)

7.4.2 RQ5: Credibility Across Conditions

To answer this research question, data were analyzed using hierarchical multiple regression (see Table 4 for key statistics from the regression analysis). Before conducting the analysis, I mean-centered the continuous control variable issue involvement to avoid multicollinearity and help in interpretation. This centered variable was also used in subsequent analyses. Further, to test the effect of visibility, I dummy coded the visibility variable (0 = *high visibility*, 1 = *low visibility*). This dummy coded variable was also used in subsequent analyses.

For each topic, a two-stage hierarchical multiple regression was conducted with message credibility as the dependent variable. Issue involvement was entered in stage one to control for its effect on message credibility. The dummy coded variable for visibility was entered in stage two. For the cancer topic, the hierarchical multiple regression revealed that at stage one, issue involvement contributed significantly to the regression model, $F(1,117) = 9.05, p = .003$, and accounted for 7.2% of the variation in message credibility. Introducing visibility explained an additional 0.4% of variation in message credibility and this change in R^2 was not significant. Thus, controlling for issue involvement, visibility did not significantly predict message

credibility for the cancer topic. Message credibility in the low visibility condition ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.20$) was therefore not significantly different to message credibility in the high visibility condition ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.19$) for the cancer topic.

Similarly, for the plants topic, at stage one, issue involvement contributed significantly to the regression model, $F(1,119) = 9.38$, $p = .003$, and accounted for 7.3% of the variation in message credibility. Introducing visibility explained an additional 2.7% of variation in message credibility and this change in R^2 was not significant. Thus, controlling for issue involvement, visibility did not significantly predict message credibility for the plants topic. Message credibility in the low visibility condition ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.20$) was therefore not significantly different to message credibility in the high visibility condition ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.12$) for the plants topic.

For the entire sample, a two-stage hierarchical multiple regression was conducted with message credibility as the dependent variable. Issue involvement and the dummy coded variable for topic were entered in stage one to control for their effect on message credibility. The dummy coded variable for visibility was entered in stage two. The hierarchical multiple regression revealed that at stage one, issue involvement and topic contributed significantly to the regression model, $F(2,237) = 33.16$, $p < .001$, and accounted for 21.9% of the variation in message credibility. Introducing visibility explained an additional 0.2% of variation in message credibility and this change in R^2 was not significant. Thus, controlling for issue involvement and topic, visibility did not significantly predict message credibility. Message credibility in the low visibility conditions ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.31$) was therefore not significantly different to message credibility in the high visibility conditions ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.12$) for the entire sample. Overall,

these results indicate that there was no statistically significant difference between message credibility across private (low visibility) and public (high visibility) groups.

Table 4

Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Message Credibility

Variable	β	t	sr^2	R	R^2	ΔR^2
Cancer Topic						
Step one				.27	.07	.07
Issue Involvement	.27	3.01**	.07			
Step two				.28	.08	.004
Issue Involvement	.27	3.04**	.07			
Visibility	.06	.68	.004			
Plants Topic						
Step one				.27	.07	.07
Issue Involvement	.27	3.04**	.07			
Step two				.32	.10	.03
Issue Involvement	.27	3.13**	.07			
Visibility	-.17	-1.89	.03			
Entire Sample						
Step one				.47	.22	.22
Issue Involvement	.25	4.30***	.06			
Topic	.41	7.16***	.17			
Step two				.47	.22	.002
Issue Involvement	.25	4.27***	.06			
Topic	.41	7.16***	.17			
Visibility	-.05	-.84	.002			

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

7.4.3 H1: Perceived Intimacy Across Conditions

Similar to the analysis for RQ5, for each topic, a two-stage hierarchical multiple regression was conducted with perceived intimacy as the dependent variable (see Table 5 for key statistics from the regression analysis). Issue involvement was entered in stage one to control for its effect on perceived intimacy. The dummy coded variable for visibility was entered in stage two. For the cancer topic, the hierarchical multiple regression revealed that at stage one, issue involvement contributed significantly to the regression model, $F(1,117) = 21.09$, $p < .001$, and

accounted for 15.3% of the variation in perceived intimacy. Introducing visibility explained an additional 3.3% of variation in perceived intimacy and this change in R^2 was significant, $F(1,116) = 4.74, p = .03$. Thus, controlling for issue involvement, visibility did significantly predict perceived intimacy for the cancer topic. H1 was therefore supported as perceived intimacy in the low visibility condition ($M = 4.81, SD = 1.29$) was significantly different to perceived intimacy in the high visibility condition ($M = 4.39, SD = 1.42$). More specifically, the low visibility condition was perceived as more intimate than the high visibility condition ($\beta = .18, t = 2.18, p = .03$).

For the plants topic, the hierarchical multiple regression revealed that at stage one, issue involvement did not significantly contribute to the regression model and accounted for 1.1% of the variation in perceived intimacy. Introducing visibility explained an additional 2.3% of variation in perceived intimacy but this change in R^2 was not significant. Thus, in comparing perceived intimacy across conditions, the low visibility condition ($M = 5.23, SD = 0.98$) was not significantly different to the high visibility condition ($M = 4.90, SD = 1.26$). H1 was therefore not supported for the plants topic.

For the entire sample, a two-stage hierarchical multiple regression was conducted with perceived intimacy as the dependent variable. Issue involvement and the dummy coded variable for topic were entered in stage one to control for their effect on perceived intimacy. The dummy coded variable for visibility was entered in stage two. The hierarchical multiple regression revealed that at stage one, issue involvement and topic contributed significantly to the regression model, $F(2,237) = 6.84, p = .001$, and accounted for 5.5% of the variation in perceived intimacy. Introducing visibility explained an additional 2.3% of variation in perceived intimacy and this change in R^2 was significant, $F(1,236) = 5.91, p = .016$. Thus, controlling for issue involvement

and topic, visibility did significantly predict perceived intimacy for the entire sample. H1 was therefore supported as perceived intimacy in the low visibility conditions ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.16$) was significantly different to perceived intimacy in the high visibility conditions ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.36$). More specifically, the low visibility conditions were perceived as more intimate than high visibility conditions ($\beta = .15$, $t = 2.43$, $p = .016$).

Thus, overall, H1 was supported for the cancer topic and the entire sample but not for the plants topic.

Table 5

Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Perceived Intimacy

Variable	β	t	sr^2	R	R^2	ΔR^2
Cancer Topic						
Step one				.39	.15	.15
Issue Involvement	.39	4.59***	.15			
Step two				.43	.19	.03
Issue Involvement	.40	4.81***	.16			
Visibility	.18	2.18*	.03			
Plants Topic						
Step one				.11	.01	.01
Issue Involvement	-.11	-1.17	.01			
Step two				.19	.03	.02
Issue Involvement	-.11	-1.21	.01			
Visibility	.15	1.67	.02			
Entire Sample						
Step one				.23	.06	.06
Issue Involvement	.15	2.34*	.02			
Topic	.19	3.00**	.04			
Step two				.28	.08	.02
Issue Involvement	.15	2.42*	.02			
Topic	.19	3.04**	.04			
Visibility	.15	2.43*	.02			

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

7.4.4 H2: Visibility>Perceived Intimacy>Credibility

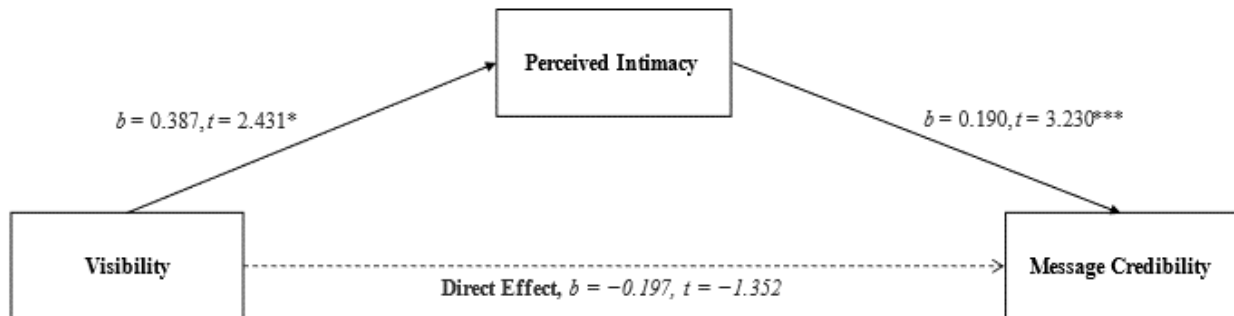
To test this hypothesis. I used Model 4 of Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS to conduct a simple mediation test (Hayes, 2009). This was done to test if the independent variable

(visibility) affected the dependent variable (message credibility) through a mediator (perceived intimacy). Before this analysis, the mediating continuous variable perceived intimacy was mean-centered to help with interpretation and avoid multicollinearity. Further, issue involvement was included as a covariate in the model to control for its effect on message credibility.

For the cancer topic, results showed that there was no significant indirect effect of visibility on message credibility through perceived intimacy, $b = 0.071$, bias-corrected 5000 bootstrap CI $[-0.017, 0.211]$. Similarly, for the plants topic, there was no significant indirect effect of visibility on message credibility through perceived intimacy, $b = 0.092$, bias-corrected 5000 bootstrap CI $[-0.011, 0.243]$.

However, for the entire sample, with topic (coded as 0 = *cancer*, 1 = *plants*) and issue involvement as covariates, there was a significant indirect effect of visibility on message credibility through perceived intimacy, $b = 0.074$, bias-corrected 5000 bootstrap CI $[0.008, 0.175]$. Results showed that the low visibility conditions (coded as 1) were perceived as more intimate than the high visibility conditions (coded as 0), $b = 0.387$, $t = 2.431$, $p = 0.016$, which in turn, led to greater message credibility, $b = 0.190$, $t = 3.230$, $p = 0.001$. There was also no significant direct effect of visibility on message credibility ($b = -0.197$, $t = -1.352$, $p = 0.178$), indicating a full mediation. Thus, for the entire sample, lower visibility led to higher perceived intimacy, which in turn led to higher message credibility (see Figure 4 for mediation model). Furthermore, this discrepancy between the topic-wise and total sample results may be an artifact of sample size as the mediation effect was significant for the entire sample with topic as one of the covariates in the model.

Thus, overall, H2 was supported for the entire sample but was not supported for the individual topics.

Figure 4*Mediation Model for Entire Sample*

7.5 Meta-Inferences

As noted in Section 7.1, adopting a mixed methods approach involves generating meta-inferences, which are explanatory conclusions engendered by mixing inferences from qualitative and quantitative studies (Creamer, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008). Rather than simply aggregating inferences from the qualitative and quantitative strands of a mixed methods study, generating meta-inferences requires presenting a holistic understanding of the phenomena being studied. Thus, in this section, I integrate the similarities and differences across my qualitative and quantitative findings on perceived intimacy and credibility evaluation (RQ3, RQ4, RQ5, H1, and H2). In doing so, I present a comprehensive understanding of information credibility evaluation on BSMPs, including how it compares to PESM and how it is impacted by perceived intimacy.

7.5.1 Visibility and Credibility

Many interview participants highlighted how the low visibility associated with BSMPs contributes to them believing that information shared on BSMPs is more credible than information shared on PESM. However, the quantitative results for RQ5 do not support the claim that there is a direct causal relationship between visibility and credibility as message credibility

was not significantly different across the high and low visibility conditions. One of the reasons for this may be the difference in how the low visibility associated with BSMPs was understood by interview participants and how it was operationalized for the experiment.

In the experiment, low visibility was operationalized as requiring administrator approval to join a group and view content posted within it, with the group described as not being accessible through public search. Yet, as is detailed in the qualitative findings, these mechanisms to strategically manage visibility alone do not result in people associating BSMPs with low visibility. Instead, the bidirectional relationship between these mechanisms and the nature of the audience on BSMPs informs the belief that these places *discourage* visibility. On the one hand, visibility control mechanisms result in users viewing BSMPs as safe and private places to interact with trusted close interpersonal ties and people with shared interests and hobbies. At the same time, people trust this audience to not share what they post outside of the BSMP. In the quantitative experiment, this audience-related aspect was not salient as participants were essentially shown a post shared by a stranger. This was because it was difficult to make the experiment participants believe that they have an existing relationship with the information poster without compromising mundane realism, which refers to the degree to which experimental conditions are similar to people's real-life and everyday conditions (Carlsmith et al., 1976). This demonstrates the difficulty in manipulating affordances for quantitative experiments. This is because while technological features and mechanisms can be manipulated, it is more difficult to manipulate context-based social and relational factors, and both technical and social and relational factors act in concert to inform how affordances operate (Davis, 2020; Evans et al., 2017). Indeed, this difficulty in manipulating affordances for quantitative experiments is reflected in how a majority of studies on social media affordances rely on qualitative methods

(Ronzhyn et al., 2022). In this dissertation, I demonstrate how a mixed methods approach can also be suitable for studying affordances.

Regardless of these limitations, taken together, the qualitative and quantitative findings demonstrate that visibility control mechanisms, on their own, do not directly cause people to view information shared on BSMPs as more credible than information shared on PESM. Instead, as I detail in the next section, this happens when these mechanisms lead to people associating BSMPs with intimacy.

7.5.2 The Role of Perceived Intimacy

Both the qualitative and quantitative findings illustrate that the low visibility associated with BSMPs results in these places being perceived as more intimate than PESM. The qualitative findings for RQ3 demonstrate how the low visibility associated with BSMPs allows people to authentically express themselves to interpersonal ties, resulting in these places being perceived as intimate, especially compared to PESM, which are viewed by some as inauthentic and performative spaces. Meanwhile, even as the quantitative study involved showing participants a post from a stranger rather than an interpersonal tie, for the cancer topic and the entire sample, there was a statistically significant difference in perceived intimacy between the BSMP condition (low visibility) and the PESM condition (high visibility). The BSMP condition was perceived as more intimate, wherein the measure for perceived intimacy was adapted from Pittman (2017) and involved asking participants the extent to which they believed that private groups (BSMPs)/public groups (PESM) facilitate staying in touch with and feeling more connected and close to people. Thus, even though the experiment participants were not evaluating the intimacy of BSMPs based on their interactions with known others, they still viewed the BSMP condition as more intimate due to the visibility control mechanisms mentioned above. However, this

difference in perceived intimacy across BSMPs and PESM may have been greater if the experiment participants were shown a post from a known other. While this challenge of recreating real-life conditions is not uncommon for experimental research, it is important to acknowledge this limitation.

Despite these limitations, I identify a key meta-inference regarding perceived intimacy as both the qualitative and quantitative findings suggest that BSMPs are viewed as more intimate than PESM. While much of the existing literature that emphasizes how users perceive BSMPs as intimate adopts a qualitative approach (Archer et al., 2021; Schreiber, 2017), my mixed methods findings verify this observation through both qualitative and quantitative studies. Through the qualitative findings, I demonstrate how the low visibility associated with BSMPs allows people to authentically express themselves, resulting in them viewing these places as intimate. The quantitative findings further verify that low visibility is associated with higher perceived intimacy. Thus, the low visibility associated with BSMPs is the key aspect that explains why BSMPs are perceived as more intimate than PESM.

My mixed methods findings also illustrate that the fact that BSMPs are perceived as more intimate than PESM, in turn, results in people viewing information shared on BSMPs as more credible. The qualitative findings for RQ4 suggest that the perceived intimacy of BSMPs contributes to the development of interpersonal trust, familiarity, and accountability within these places, resulting in people associating BSMPs with credible information. In comparison, information shared on PESM is viewed as less credible because these spaces are associated with inauthenticity and algorithmically-curated content directed toward advertising products and maximizing engagement. Meanwhile, in the quantitative experiment, H2 was supported for the entire sample as perceived intimacy mediated the relationship between visibility and message

credibility. In other words, the low visibility associated with BSMPs led to experiment participants perceiving these places as more intimate than PESM. This, in turn, resulted in them ascribing higher credibility to the posts they encountered on BSMPs compared to PESM. Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative findings therefore demonstrate that perceived intimacy is the mechanism that explains why people may view information shared on BSMPs as more credible than information shared on PESM. While existing literature simply speculates that this may be the case (Masip et al., 2021; Kantar Media, 2018), my mixed methods findings verify this claim.

Overall, my findings demonstrate that when people view a mediated space or place as intimate, it can result in them associating it with credible information. Thus, researchers who focus on credibility evaluation on social media should pay more attention to the role played by perceived intimacy. My qualitative and quantitative findings also illustrate the importance of comparing information credibility evaluation across different spaces and places on social media rather than focusing on a specific platform or service.

7.5.3 Authenticity and the Role of Algorithms

My findings also provide additional insights into *why* the perception that BSMPs are intimate results in users associating these places with credible information. Future research can build on these insights and examine them in greater detail. My qualitative findings suggest that the perceived intimacy of BSMPs is informed by the fact that people associate these places with *authenticity*. Much of the vast literature on authenticity and social media focuses on how influencers and regular social media users publicly perform authenticity on PESM (Abidin, 2020; Duffy & Gerrard, 2022; Kennedy, 2020). Yet, little is known about authenticity on BSMPs and how it impacts information credibility evaluation. Thus, through a mixed methods approach,

researchers can examine how perceived authenticity impacts information credibility evaluation on both BSMPs and PESM.

My qualitative findings also suggest that the personal agency users believe they have over curating their information environment on BSMPs in the absence of content ranking algorithms impacts credibility evaluation. Echoing existing scholarship (Sundar, 2008b; Sundar & Marathe, 2010), the interview participants stated that they believe they can curate a *credible* information environment on BSMPs. They indicated that this is because their identity is tied to the belief that they surround themselves with people who share credible information. In comparison, on PESM, they do not have the same kind of personal agency as algorithms determine the information environment. In the experiment, this key difference between BSMPs and PESM could not be measured. This is because it was difficult to simulate the experience of being shown information curated by an algorithm trained on one's past engagement with content on PESM. Future research can look into verifying the claims made in my qualitative study and examine whether the presence (or absence) of content ranking algorithms results in message credibility for the same content significantly differing across BSMPs and PESM. Bode and Vraga's (2018) experiment on algorithmic misinformation correction points toward a potential way in which the presence (or absence) of algorithms can be experimentally manipulated as they distinguish between corrections from fictitious users and "suggested corrections" from Facebook's algorithm in their experimental stimuli.

7.5.4 Summary

Through mixing inferences from my qualitative and quantitative studies, I find that visibility control mechanisms, on their own, do not directly cause people to view information shared on BSMPs as more credible than information shared on PESM. Instead, the low visibility

associated with BSMPs leads to people perceiving these places as intimate, which in turn, contributes to them viewing information shared on BSMPs as more credible. Thus, perceived intimacy is a key underlying mechanism that explains the relationship between visibility and credibility on BSMPs and PESM.

In this section, I have highlighted the meta-inferences gleaned from combining qualitative and quantitative findings for RQ4, RQ5, H1, and H2. In the next chapter, I situate these meta-inferences as well as the qualitative findings for RQ1-3 in relation to existing literature and reflect on how they contribute to our understanding of BSMPs and social media more broadly.

Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, I first outline the limitations of this dissertation, followed by a discussion on the four main topics I focus on, namely the comparison between bounded social media places (BSMPs) and public elements of social media (PESM) (RQ1), the affordances of BSMPs (RQ2), the perceived intimacy of BSMPs (RQ3), and credibility evaluation on BSMPs and how it compares to PESM (RQ4, RQ5, H1, H2). For each topic, I detail how my findings contribute to scholarship and practice, engender ideas for future research, and enhance our general understanding of the topic. This is followed by a brief concluding discussion on the future of BSMPs for social media users, companies, and scholars.

8.1 Limitations

The methodological limitations for both my qualitative and quantitative studies are detailed in Chapter 6 and 7, respectively. It is, however, important to briefly restate some of these limitations as well as acknowledge some of the limitations associated with my conceptual and theoretical approach.

For the qualitative study, the sample, which was recruited on social media and through snowball sampling, was restricted to primarily highly educated people who have unfettered access to technology and regularly use BSMPs. Thus, the findings may not be generalizable to other populations with differing levels of education, technological access and skills, and experience with using BSMPs. Based on their knowledge and experience, these populations may only use 1-2 specific platforms and services and may not have strong opinions about technological features like encryption and content ranking algorithms like my participants did. Further, while I oversampled for diasporic and immigrant populations, this was not done systematically and my findings should not be viewed as generalizable to all immigrants in the

U.S., who have varied experiences depending on their social, political, and economic context. Future research with more explicit purposeful sampling of different immigrant and diasporic communities would help to illuminate how each of these communities perceive and use BSMPs. Furthermore, during the interviews, participants were sometimes prompted by the researcher to compare BSMPs and PESM, meaning that there is a danger that this distinction between BSMPs and PESM was introduced by the researcher rather than the participants themselves. However, it is important to note that many participants did also make this comparison between BSMPs and PESM without being prompted.

For the quantitative study, the sample, which was drawn from the Prolific research platform, was dominated by White, educated, and highly technologically competent participants. This is characteristic of samples drawn from online recruitment platforms like Prolific (Turner et al., 2020). Further, while I oversampled for participants belonging to immigrant and diasporic communities in the qualitative study, I could not do the same for the quantitative study due to the limitations of Prolific's participant selection filters. Thus, while both the quantitative and qualitative study samples consist of users of BSMPs, the sample profiles and particular demographic characteristics are not comparable across these studies. As with any experimental research, there were also limitations regarding external validity and mundane realism as participants were asked to imagine that they were part of a private/public group on a fictitious social media platform and essentially evaluate the credibility of a post from a stranger. As my qualitative findings demonstrate, this situation of encountering information posted by a stranger differs from people's everyday experiences of using private groups and servers in particular. On such BSMPs, people develop interpersonal familiarity with other group members and gauge how trustworthy they are based on interacting with them and viewing their posting history over time.

Nonetheless, adopting a mixed methods approach instead of exclusively relying on the quantitative findings does help me address this limitation and present a more holistic understanding of information credibility evaluation on BSMPs and PESM.

It is also important to acknowledge some of the limitations associated with my conceptual and theoretical approach, particularly my conceptualization of BSMPs and the distinction I draw between these places and PESM. First, as I note in Chapter 2, the four types of BSMPs I identify, namely private chats within mobile messaging services, private messaging within social media platforms, private communities within channel-based messaging services, and private visible and hidden Facebook groups, are not an exhaustive list of types, nor are they mutually exclusive. Thus, there may be types of BSMPs I failed to consider, a particular BSMP could fall under more than one type, and new types of BSMPs may emerge in the future. Second, there are spaces and places on social media that cannot be neatly classified as either BSMPs or PESM. For example, the “Stories” feature on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat is a form of ephemeral posting wherein content typically disappears 24 hours after it has been posted (Triệu & Baym, 2020). Stories can be shared publicly or with a specifically curated list of individuals through the “Close Friends” feature. Some may contend that Stories are PESM as they appear on users’ main Instagram or Facebook feed; however, Stories only posted to Close Friends may be BSMPs as they are associated with intended audiences. Similarly, it is difficult to ascertain where different elements of the messaging service Snapchat fit. The ephemerality associated with messaging on Snapchat as well as the Stories feature further complicates whether they are classified as BSMPs or PESM. More research is therefore needed to understand how users’ perceive the Stories feature as well as other spaces and places on social media that I may

have overlooked. This can help to determine whether they can be considered either BSMPs or PESM, or if there is a need to create a different category for them.

Finally, instead of focusing on a specific platform or service, I chose to focus on developing an integrated theoretical understanding of private channels on social media that have shared attributes across a *variety* of platforms and services. This may have led to me overlooking culturally and contextually-specific understandings of *particular* platforms and services. For example, scholars have found that the Chinese social and cultural context impacts how WeChat is designed as well as how it is perceived and used (Chen et al., 2018), while in India, WhatsApp is viewed through a “WhatsApp imaginary” that is informed by the Indian cultural context (Maddox & Kanthawala, 2022, p. 1). However, including a variety of platforms and services in my analysis allowed me to engage in broader theorizing about BSMPs and scholars can draw on my work while studying different BSMPs across diverse cultures and contexts.

8.2 Comparison between BSMPs and PESM

My interviews reveal that people are increasingly turning to a variety of BSMPs to directly communicate with family, friends, and people with shared interests and hobbies. In comparison, PESM are primarily viewed by my participants as algorithmically-curated entertainment spaces for passive content consumption. While scholars have started to focus on how people navigate between a variety of social media platforms and services for different purposes (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Bode & Vraga, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2019), my findings suggest that focusing on comparisons at a platform or service-level may be limiting. This is because my interview participants often compared BSMPs and PESM on the same platform or service as well as across different platforms and services. For example, scholars who focus on comparisons at a platform or service-level may examine how people use Facebook and

WhatsApp for different purposes. However, this may be facile as people may use private Facebook groups, Facebook Messenger, and private group chats on WhatsApp for similar purposes. At the same time, they may view public group chats on WhatsApp as similar to public Facebook pages and groups as well as believe that publicly posting on Facebook is vastly different to communicating via private Facebook groups or Facebook Messenger. My distinction between BSMPs and PESM allows scholars to consider all of these possibilities and facilitates more platform and service-agnostic theorizing, which allows for greater theoretical durability in an evolving social media landscape (Evans et al., 2017; van Raemdonck & Pierson, 2022).

To facilitate such theorizing, I contribute an analytical framework in the form of my distinction between BSMPs and PESM. This distinction can help social media scholars more clearly define their object of study and highlight which constitutive part of social media they are studying, regardless of the platform or service they may be focusing on. This can also aid researchers in drawing on relevant literature, depending on whether they are studying BSMPs or PESM. For example, if a scholar is focusing on PESM, the literature on SNSs is relevant to them because it details how people publicly interact with others on social media (Ellison et al., 2007; Ellison & Vitak, 2015). This older scholarship on SNSs can be viewed through the lens of my distinction between BSMPs and PESM to examine which spaces and places on social media are still used to publicly interact with others and how this has changed with the increasing use of BSMPs. Moreover, scholars who focus on PESM can draw on research examining the cultural production of entertainment content for social media (Abidin, 2018; Cunningham & Craig, 2021; Duffy, 2017), given that my findings suggest that such content is dominant on PESM. Meanwhile, those studying BSMPs can draw on older scholarship that focused on instant messaging (Nardi et al., 2000) and private online communities and discussion forums (Plant,

2004) as well as the vast recent literature on mobile messaging services from the Global South (Chen et al., 2018; Malhotra & Pearce, 2022; Pearce & Malhotra, 2022; Rossini et al., 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2021). My distinction between BSMPs and PESM allows scholars who draw on this work to understand how mobile messaging and private communities on social media are viewed in comparison to PESM within the modern social media ecology.

I am, of course, not alone in creating a framework to help social media researchers clarify their object of study. For instance, as noted in Chapter 2, Bayer et al. (2020) contend that researchers can identify social media elements in the form of user profiles (profile element), “Newsfeed” and “For You” pages (stream element), traversable networks of social connections (network element), and private messaging within social media platforms (message element). However, there are two key issues with this framework. First, these elements may not include certain spaces and places on social media. For example, it is unclear where BSMPs like private Facebook groups or private Discord servers would fit within this typology of elements. Second, the attributes of some of these social media elements are vastly different across different platforms and services. For instance, a profile on Facebook is not the same as a profile on WhatsApp or Discord. The former also includes users’ posts and a list of their networked connections, while the latter does not. To be sure, as noted in the previous section, my own distinction between BSMPs and PESM also has limitations and may not cover all of social media. However, this distinction offers an analytical starting point to help social media scholars clarify their object of study.

This distinction between BSMPs and PESM can also contribute to generating more nuanced public and journalistic discourse on the effects of social media. In recent years, technologically-deterministic arguments regarding the deleterious effects of social media on teen

mental health have gained much traction both among pundits (Haidt, 2021; Twenge, 2017; Wen, 2023) and in everyday conversations. Yet, within such discourse, social media is used as a catch-all term to primarily refer to PESM, with a focus on how algorithmically-suggested content promoting idealized lifestyles negatively impacts mental health. Meanwhile, the use of BSMPs is underplayed or ignored. My findings suggest that the outcomes associated with using BSMPs and PESM may be vastly different because the former is associated with active use through directed communication with interpersonal ties and people with shared interests, while the latter is linked to passive consumption of content. Active and passive use of social media have distinct effects on well-being as the former is weakly associated with positive effects and the latter is strongly linked to negative effects (Hall, 2023; Valkenburg, 2021). Therefore, in discussing the effects of social media, it would be incredibly useful if journalists as well as policy-makers distinguished between BSMPs and PESM. In fact, the impact of this lack of distinction is being seen at a policy level, with states in the U.S. introducing blanket age restrictions on social media use without distinguishing between BSMPs and PESM (Fung, 2023). Such policies could prevent teenagers from directly communicating with friends and family via private chats and groups on social media, even if they are aimed at mitigating perceived harms associated with PESM. Thus, it is important that these policies and journalistic discourse regarding the effects of social media become more nuanced and acknowledge the distinction between BSMPs and PESM. A failure to do so could result in regular people being prevented from socially interacting with others via private channels on social media and losing out on potential benefits associated with social media use.

Furthermore, while the main focus of this dissertation is BSMPs, by examining how these places compare to PESM, my interview findings also contribute insights regarding more public

spaces on social media. As noted in Chapter 6, my findings contradict older scholarship on PESM that focused on how people used these spaces for the purpose of staying connected to weak ties (Ellison et al., 2007; Ellison & Vitak, 2015). My interview participants said that their social media feeds are dominated by content from influencers, public figures, and businesses rather than updates from weak ties. Future research can examine the extent to which this perception is actually reflected in users' social media feeds and if this differs across platforms and services. More research is also needed on how PESM complement BSMPs. My findings demonstrate that entertainment content from PESM is often sent through BSMPs to facilitate discussions and relational maintenance. For example, people share videos and memes they see on their public Instagram or TikTok feeds with their private group chats on WhatsApp or Telegram. Future research can examine the patterns of such content sharing and also explore other ways in which PESM and BSMPs may complement each other.

Overall, therefore, my distinction between BSMPs and PESM contributes to social media scholarship by offering an analytical framework to clarify scholars' object of study. This distinction can also help to facilitate more nuanced discourse and policy-making on social media. Finally, my findings regarding how people perceive BSMPs in comparison to PESM engender new avenues for future research on social media, including scholarship on how BSMPs and PESM complement each other.

8.3 Affordances of BSMPs

Utilizing Davis's (2020) mechanisms and conditions framework for affordances, I find that BSMPs *discourage* socially mediated visibility and *encourage* receiver and sender-oriented personalization as well as synchronicity. Before discussing how each of these affordances

operates, it is important to outline the advantages of utilizing an affordances approach and the scholarly contributions it allows me to make.

Adopting an affordances approach enables me to highlight how technological features and social and relational factors act in concert to inform how BSMPs are perceived and used. For example, in examining how BSMPs *discourage* visibility, I find that people believe that the content they post on BSMPs is not visible to unintended audiences because of technological features like encryption and mechanisms like screening questions and administrator control over membership. At the same time, the trust they have in the interpersonal ties and people with shared interests they interact with on BSMPs to not share what they post with unintended audiences also contributes to this belief. Thus, it is important for scholars who focus on BSMPs to avoid a technologically deterministic lens and highlight how *both* technological aspects and social and relational factors impact how BSMPs are perceived and used.

Utilizing Davis's (2020) mechanisms and conditions framework for affordances also involves focusing on *how* and *for whom and under what circumstances* affordances operate. Focusing on *how* affordances operate facilitates theoretical flexibility. It allows me to cover a variety of BSMPs and recognize how different BSMPs may encourage or discourage the same affordance to varying degrees. For example, encrypted private chats comprising of close interpersonal ties on mobile messaging services *discourage* visibility to a greater degree than large private Facebook groups or Discord servers organized around shared interests. This is because of differences in technological features and audiences. At the same time as recognizing these differences, I also underscore how BSMPs more broadly *discourage* visibility, allowing scholars to draw on this more general observation in future research on BSMPs. Thus, by focusing on *how* affordances operate, I am able to develop a shared and durable theoretical

language that scholars can build on in future work at the same time as acknowledging differences across diverse BSMPs.

Also focusing on *for whom and under what circumstances* BSMPs afford enables me to highlight how affordances may operate differently for people who belong to marginalized communities and/or use BSMPs to communicate about sensitive and emotionally challenging topics. My findings demonstrate that these people require BSMPs to *discourage* visibility and *encourage* sender-oriented personalization to an especially strong degree. This is because they are at a greater risk of experiencing harmful outcomes when these affordances do not operate in the way that they need them to. For example, if an individual has a chronic health condition and uses a BSMP to get advice from others who have the same condition, they want to be sure that only people who also have that condition are members of the BSMP and that their sensitive health information is not shared outside of the BSMP. To facilitate this, they require BSMPs to have especially strict screening questions as well as explicit norms that discourage sharing of content with unintended audiences. Future research can further explore how the affordances of BSMPs operate for people belonging to marginalized communities by specifically focusing on these communities and how they use and perceive BSMPs. This is important because we know that the harms associated with social media disproportionately impact such communities (Bailey, 2021; Dhoest & Szulc, 2016; Fritz & Gonzales, 2018; Lawson, 2018; Massanari, 2017; Phillips & Milner, 2021).

My findings also demonstrate that affordances are often articulated comparatively as my interview participants highlighted how they view visibility, personalization, and synchronicity on BSMPs in comparison to PESM. Yet, as Ronzhyn et al. (2022) find in their systematic literature review on affordances in social media research, most studies focus on the affordances of a

specific social media platform, with Facebook and Twitter being the most studied platforms. As people use multiple social media platforms and services and navigate between them (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Bode & Vraga, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2019), echoing Duffy et al. (2017), I argue that scholars need to focus on how affordances are perceived and articulated comparatively across the broader social media ecology.

Overall, adopting an affordances approach enables me to highlight how technological features and mechanisms as well as social and relational factors impact how BSMPs are used and perceived, develop a shared and durable theoretical language for future scholarship on BSMPs, and underscore how marginalized communities use and view BSMPs. I also contribute to broader theorizing on social media affordances by demonstrating that users often articulate affordances in comparative terms. Next, I detail how my findings also enhance our understanding of the specific affordances associated with BSMPs.

8.3.1 Visibility

BSMPs *discourage* socially mediated visibility as these places are considered private, difficult to access and search, and are associated with known and intended audiences. In comparison, PESM are associated with persistent, publicly accessible, searchable, and shareable content that can reach unintended audiences. BSMPs allow users to strategically manage visibility through technological features and mechanisms, particularly encryption and administrator control over groups with both tools and screening questions. People especially trust the interpersonal ties they interact with on BSMPs to not share the content they post outside of these places. In some private groups and servers organized around shared interests, there is also an implicit or explicit understanding that what is shared within the BSMP stays within the BSMP. Finally, the low visibility associated with BSMPs results in indeterminate outcomes,

including positive outcomes like social support exchange and collective action against unjust structures as well as more harmful outcomes like harassment.

Socially mediated visibility is relational, strategic, and outcome-driven (Pearce et al., 2018); my findings demonstrate that the relational dimension of visibility, in particular, requires more attention when it comes to BSMPs. Much research has focused on how BSMPs allow users to strategically manage visibility boundaries and restrict access to only known audiences through encryption (Gursky et al., 2022; Lokot, 2020; Santos et al., 2021) as well as administrator control over membership within chats and groups (Malinen, 2021; Swart et al., 2019). However, the perception that BSMPs *discourage* visibility is also informed by the implicit trust users have in the audience they interact with within these places, especially close interpersonal ties. Because of the strength of their relationship with them, users trust these interpersonal ties to not share what they post with unintended audiences. Future research can look into whether this trust is justified, how it differs across various types of interpersonal relationships, and factors that may result in its breach.

Scholars can also focus on relationality and visibility within the context of BSMPs organized around shared interests and hobbies. I found that in some interest-based private groups and servers, there is an implicit trust that content will not be posted outside of the group or server and/or there are explicit norms and rules to discourage this from happening. Much of the extant scholarship on such BSMPs focuses on how they are perceived as safe places to disclose personal information and acquire support from strangers (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2016; Archer et al., 2021; Pruchniewska, 2019). However, little attention is paid to how this perception may be informed by a sense of implicit trust between group members and/or the existence of explicit norms and rules regarding sharing content outside of the group. Furthermore, researchers can

examine what contributes to the development of such trust and analyze the effectiveness of these norms and rules, especially for BSMPs where sensitive information is shared. The importance of understanding this is exemplified in the April 2023 reports of U.S. government classified documents being allegedly shared within an interest-based private Discord server and then being leaked outside of the server (Harris & Oakford, 2023).

In terms of the outcome-driven dimension of socially mediated visibility, my findings echo extant literature on how the low visibility associated with BSMPs facilitates social support exchange (Chan, 2018; Yeshua-Katz, 2021) and organizing for collective action (Lokot, 2020; Milan & Barbosa, 2020). However, I also find that low visibility can result in undesirable outcomes, especially harassment and unwanted contact. My findings demonstrate that because BSMPs and PESM typically exist *within* the same platform or service, visibility on PESM can make people vulnerable to harassment on BSMPs. For example, publicly posting on Twitter or posting in a public Telegram channel can make a user visible to unintended audiences, who may then harass them through direct messages on the same platform or service. This can also happen across different BSMPs. For example, an individual who posts on a private Facebook group makes their profile visible to other group members. This can result in group members accessing their profile and harassing them via a dyadic chat on Facebook messenger. The low visibility associated with BSMPs may embolden people to engage in such behavior due to the absence of broad audiences to hold others accountable and the lack of platform-level moderation. More research is needed to understand how such harassment can be addressed in the absence of platform-level moderation on BSMPs. Furthermore, this phenomenon illustrates the need for platforms or services that exclusively contain BSMPs rather than both BSMPs and PESM.

Indeed, it is important for scholars who focus on visibility and BSMPs to recognize that visibility is associated with both beneficial and harmful outcomes (Pearce et al., 2018). The fact that BSMPs *discourage* visibility can help marginalized communities safely and privately form what Steele (2018) describes as “enclaved communities to serve as safe spaces for those denied access to the dominant public sphere” (p. 120). At the same time, because of this low visibility, BSMPs were used by extremists to organize the January 6 Capitol insurrection in 2021 (Greenspan, 2021; Lapowsky, 2021). This demonstrates that future research on BSMPs needs to consider both the potential benefits and dangers that result from these places *discouraging* visibility. This also reflects how the same technological affordance can lead to divergent outcomes, informed by contextual factors and broader social structures (Davis, 2020; Evans et al., 2017).

8.3.2 Personalization

BSMPs allow users to control who they receive relevant content from, thereby *encouraging* receiver-oriented personalization. Users believe that they receive relevant content on BSMPs because the interpersonal ties they interact with within these places are familiar with their interests and they can also self-select into private groups and servers organized around shared interests. They also believe they have more personal agency in personalizing their information environment on BSMPs in the absence of content ranking algorithms. In comparison, PESM are associated with receiving non-personalized and algorithmically-curated content from public figures and influencers. BSMPs also *encourage* sender-oriented personalization as they facilitate targeted communication with specific individuals and groups, allowing people to acquire information and advice as well as maintain interpersonal

relationships. In comparison, on PESM, users believe that content ranking algorithms make such targeted communication difficult by suppressing the content they post.

By distinguishing between how BSMPs *encourage* receiver-oriented personalization and sender-oriented personalization, I highlight the need for more clarity regarding how personalization is conceptualized. Scholars use the term personalization to refer to both receiving personalized content from specific individuals and groups (Kümpel, 2021) as well as sending personalized content to specific individuals and groups (Fox & McEwan, 2017). My findings demonstrate that receiver-oriented personalization and sender-oriented personalization are distinct concepts, even as they are both underpinned by the root affordance of visibility since they are associated with interacting with intended audiences. Thus, scholars can draw on my distinction between receiver-oriented and sender-oriented personalization to more clearly indicate which conceptualization of personalization they are focusing on.

In terms of receiver-oriented personalization, my findings also highlight the importance of differentiating between implicit and explicit personalization (Kümpel, 2021). The former refers to system or algorithm-driven personalization, while the latter refers to how users control and personalize their own information environment. My interview participants revealed that they associate implicit personalization with a lack of control and receiving irrelevant and non-personalized content on PESM, echoing extant literature (Swart, 2021). More research is needed to understand the degree to which this perception is actually reflected in users' social media feeds. Furthermore, it is also important to examine the extent to which this belief is informed by public discourse on how social media content ranking algorithms amplify problematic information (Fournier, 2021). It is possible that because people associate these algorithms with

problematic information, it becomes socially desirable to say that algorithmically-suggested content is not personalized or relevant for them.

In contrast, explicit personalization on BSMPs is associated with control and receiving relevant content from interpersonal ties and people with shared interests, aligning with existing literature (Goh et al., 2019; Masip et al., 2021; Lou et al., 2021). Future research, especially on news and information, can explore to what extent explicit personalization results in people's news and information diets becoming ideologically homogeneous. While much attention has been paid to the idea that social media algorithms create filter bubbles wherein people only see news and information that aligns with their ideological perspective (Pariser, 2011), research has found that people are actually exposed to more diverse ideological viewpoints and news on social media compared to other forms of media (Barberá, 2020; Barnidge, 2017; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). However, in the absence of content ranking algorithms, users can explicitly personalize their information environment on BSMPs and create filter bubbles wherein they are not exposed to diverse viewpoints and news. Indeed, my findings demonstrate that BSMPs are characterized by homophily and receiving content from people similar to oneself. Thus, it is important for scholars to move away from exclusively focusing on how algorithms may or may not create filter bubbles; instead, my findings point toward a need for more research on the news and information diet of people who have explicit control over personalizing their information environment on social media.

In terms of sender-oriented personalization, my participants noted that BSMPs *encourage* this affordance because it is easy to reach out to specific individuals or groups by going back to pre-existing chats/groups or starting new chats/groups. In comparison, on PESM, this line of action is *discouraged* because it is tedious and time-consuming to place one's friends or

followers into different groups and sub-groups. Yet, through the introduction of features like “Close Friends” on Instagram and “Circles” on Twitter, which allow users to easily reach a curated list of individuals, there seems to be a concerted effort to make sender-oriented personalization easier on PESM (Mehta, 2022). As these features become more popular, future research can compare sender-oriented personalization on PESM and BSMPs.

Sender-oriented personalization is also closely tied to the outcome of acquiring informational support on BSMPs, echoing extant literature (Chan, 2018; Yeshua-Katz, 2021). My participants said that they value the ability to reach out to specific individuals and groups to ask for advice and acquire information about certain topics. More research is needed to examine how this compares to the use of online public discussion boards and forums for the same purpose (Chuang & Yang, 2014; Sherman & Greenfield, 2013; Shim et al., 2011). BSMPs are not publicly accessible like these boards and forums. At the same time, these boards and forums are typically associated with pseudonymity, while BSMPs like private Facebook groups require users to display their real name. Thus, researchers can examine how these differences impact the experience of receiving and giving informational support online.

8.3.3 Synchronicity

BSMPs *encourage* synchronicity due to both technological features and social and relational expectations and norms associated with these places. While synchronicity is typically associated with immediate feedback, conversations on BSMPs often *feel* synchronous and continuous, regardless of the transmission time between messages. Technological features like the presence function, mobile notifications, and the absence of content ranking algorithms make it easier for people to view and respond to messages and posts, resulting in BSMPs being associated with continuous conversations, especially compared to PESM. Furthermore, when

mutual expectations regarding response times are met, conversations on BSMPs *feel* continuous and synchronous. This is particularly true when people use BSMPs to interact with close interpersonal ties.

A key reason why conversations on BSMPs *feel* synchronous even when they are not characterized by immediate feedback is because content is typically ranked chronologically rather than algorithmically within these places. The absence of content ranking algorithms results in users believing that they are more likely to encounter posts and messages from others and can therefore more easily respond to them. This, in turn, leads to conversations on BSMPs feeling continuous, especially in comparison to PESM. This demonstrates how affordances are perceived and articulated comparatively as the chronological nature of BSMPs is viewed in comparison to PESM, where the presence of algorithms is believed to impede continuous conversations by suppressing content posted for interpersonal ties. Thus, researchers should pay attention to how synchronicity is viewed comparatively across the broader social media ecology instead of focusing on specific platforms or services.

This comparative view of synchronicity also challenges the traditional idea that this affordance is exclusively associated with immediate feedback and real-time interactions (Fox & McEwan, 2017). My findings illustrate that disentrainment, which refers to how users can access a post or message and respond to it any time on social media (Carr & Hayes, 2015), is more closely associated with synchronicity rather than asynchronicity on BSMPs. This is because, on BSMPs, being able to view and respond to a post or message at any time facilitates continuous conversations that *feel* synchronous as they are not impeded by algorithmically-suggested content. Furthermore, my findings challenge Carr and Hayes's (2015) argument that disentrainment is a defining feature of PESM. Instead, the presence of content ranking

algorithms on PESM is viewed as hindering the ability to log on and respond to a message or post at any time.

To be sure, *some* BSMPs like private dyadic and small group chats on mobile messaging services are associated with the more traditional conceptualization of synchronicity. These BSMPs are viewed as facilitating real-time interactions characterized by short transmission times between messages, especially with close interpersonal ties. While this can engender a sense of co-presence and facilitate relational maintenance (Christensen, 2009; Cui, 2016; Park & Sundar, 2015), it can also give rise to onerous expectations and obligations regarding responding to messages (Hall & Baym, 2012; Kneidinger-Müller, 2018). Indeed, my findings demonstrate that these BSMPs only feel synchronous when mutual expectations regarding response times are met. Future research can focus on how these expectations are negotiated and the extent to which private chats within mobile messaging services allow users to disconnect when they want to (Mannell, 2019).

8.4 Perceived Intimacy

BSMPs are perceived as intimate as they are associated with experiencing people's whole self and innermost being, which is one way in which intimacy is conceptualized (Hu et al., 2004). These places are also believed to engender social presence, which is associated with intimacy (Gunawardena, 1995; Pittman & Reich, 2016). In particular, as BSMPs *discourage* visibility, it results in people feeling like they can authentically express themselves within these places in a way that feels similar to face-to-face interactions, especially compared to PESM, which are associated with idealized self-presentation and inauthenticity. The absence of content ranking algorithms also contributes to the perceived intimacy of BSMPs. This is because people believe that they are receiving content from humans rather than algorithms and that they can

engage in continuous and directed interactions with close interpersonal ties in the absence of algorithmic interference.

While much of the existing scholarship on BSMPs stops short at simply highlighting how users describe these places as intimate (Archer et al., 2021; Schreiber, 2017; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2018), my findings illustrate how users' perceptions of BSMPs relate to existing conceptualizations of intimacy. First, I find that people believe that they can engage in authentic and genuine interactions on BSMPs, which relates to the conceptualization of intimacy as experiencing people's whole self and innermost being (Hu et al., 2004). In comparison, PESM are associated with inauthenticity and performativity. As noted in the previous chapter, scholarship on authenticity and social media primarily examines how influencers and regular social media users publicly perform authenticity on PESM (Abidin, 2020; Duffy & Gerrard, 2022; Kennedy, 2020). My findings indicate that there is also a need to focus on how authenticity is perceived and performed on BSMPs as well as the relationship between authenticity and intimacy within these places.

Second, I discover that users associate BSMPs with social presence as they feel like interactants on BSMPs are within the same physical space. This relates to another conceptualization of intimacy, wherein the perceived intimacy of mediated channels is closely linked to social presence (Gunawardena, 1995; Pittman & Reich, 2016). As noted in Chapter 4, in CMC literature, social presence refers to the "sense of being with another" (Biocca et al., 2023, p. 456), and is typically associated with the degree to which channels allow users to express non-verbal cues like tone of voice and eye contact (Short et al., 1976; Xu & Liao, 2020). However, my findings demonstrate that the absence of content ranking algorithms is another factor that contributes to users associating a mediated channel with social presence. My

interview participants highlighted how they believe that they are receiving content from humans rather than algorithms on BSMPs, resulting in them associating these places with social presence. While scholars have focused on whether interacting with chatbots and digital assistants can engender social presence (Kim et al., 2013; Kim & Sundar, 2012; Tsai et al., 2021), not much attention has been paid to interactions with content ranking algorithms. My findings indicate that more research is needed to examine how the absence (or presence) of content ranking algorithms impacts the perceived social presence and intimacy of different mediated channels.

I also highlight how the affordances of BSMPs contribute to these places being perceived as intimate. In particular, the fact that BSMPs *discourage* visibility results in this perception. Echoing extant literature (Alinejad, 2019; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2018; Xiong & Liu, 2022), my interview participants underscored how the strict visibility boundaries and privacy associated with BSMPs foster trust and intimacy. This was verified in the quantitative experiment as private groups were perceived to be more intimate than public groups. Thus, my mixed methods findings demonstrate that on social media, there is a strong relationship between low visibility and perceived intimacy. Future research can further explore this relationship and examine the underlying mechanisms that explain it.

Overall, I contribute to our understanding of *why* BSMPs are perceived as intimate. I highlight how the perceived intimacy of BSMPs is related to authenticity, social presence, and low visibility.

8.5 Information Credibility Evaluation

My qualitative interviews reveal that people rely on multiple, often overlapping, heuristics to evaluate the credibility of information on BSMPs. The interview participants

indicated that this results in many of them viewing information shared on BSMPs as more credible than information shared on PESM. They consider the reputation of and their interpersonal familiarity with the individuals they interact with on BSMPs and rely on tacit endorsements as they expect that false information will be corrected or removed on BSMPs. Some also believe that they have personal control over curating a credible information environment on BSMPs and that individuals share information within these places because it is relevant to others rather than to persuade or manipulate anyone. While these heuristics are mentioned in existing literature on information credibility evaluation (Chaiken, 1987; Klawitter & Hargittai, 2018; Metzger et al., 2010; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013), the ways in which they operate are informed by the affordances of BSMPs, particularly the low visibility and high receiver-oriented personalization associated with these places. The perceived intimacy of BSMPs also plays a role in credibility evaluation as it results in people associating these places with authenticity and interpersonal trust and familiarity. Interview participants also discussed relying on the emergent *accountability heuristic* to evaluate credibility. This involves considering the perceived accountability or responsibility for sharing credible information within a specific mediated space or place. For some, accountability is greater on BSMPs, resulting in them associating these places with credible information, while others associate PESM with greater accountability, and consequently, more credible information.

To further understand this comparison between credibility evaluation on BSMPs and PESM, I also conducted a quantitative experiment, wherein I manipulated the affordance of visibility and examined the relationship between visibility, intimacy, and credibility. I found that message credibility for the same post across private groups (low visibility) and public groups (high visibility) was not significantly different. However, private groups were perceived as more

intimate than public groups and perceived intimacy mediated the relationship between visibility and credibility. In other words, lower visibility led to higher perceived intimacy, which in turn, led to higher message credibility. Thus, my mixed methods findings demonstrate that perceived intimacy is the mechanism that explains why people may view information shared on BSMPs as more credible than information shared on PESM.

My findings suggest that credibility evaluation on social media is a relational process, informed by the nature of one's relationship with others within a mediated space or place. My mixed methods findings highlight how the perceived intimacy of BSMPs facilitates the development of interpersonal familiarity and trust between people who interact with each other within these places, resulting in them associating BSMPs with credible information. This emphasis on relational aspects and intimacy differs from much of the extant credibility research highlighted in Chapter 4, wherein credibility evaluation is described as an individually-centered process informed by individual cognition, abilities, and motivations (Fogg, 2003; Metzger, 2007). Even as some scholars have recognized that social media users depend on others to evaluate the credibility of information (see Tandoc et al., 2018), many continue to focus on how users rely on explicit and visible cues such as the likes and comments on a post (Geeng et al., 2020; Mena et al., 2020) or the number of followers the information poster has (Westerman et al., 2012). Focusing exclusively on these visible cues underplays how the nature of one's relationship with others within a mediated space or place impacts credibility evaluation. My findings demonstrate that people view information shared on BSMPs as credible because they trust and are familiar with the close interpersonal ties they interact with within these places. They are also able to build interpersonal trust and familiarity through ongoing interactions with people in private groups and servers organized around shared interests. Thus, researchers need to pay

more attention to how these relational aspects and processes impact information credibility evaluation on social media.

Another relational aspect that demands more attention is my interview participants' reliance on the *accountability heuristic* to evaluate credibility. I find that when individuals believe that people within a mediated space or place owe it to others to share credible information, they associate that space or place with credible information. Future research can look into this further by quantitatively measuring perceived accountability for sharing credible information on BSMPs and PESM and examining its relationship to perceived, and actual, credibility. Furthermore, scholars can explore whether accountability differs depending on one's audience on social media. For instance, do people feel more accountable for sharing credible information with close interpersonal ties compared to strangers?

Like with the other topics discussed in this chapter, the absence of content ranking algorithms also plays a key role when it comes to information credibility evaluation on BSMPs. In the absence of algorithms, people believe that they can curate a credible information environment for themselves on BSMPs. Much attention has been paid to the algorithmic amplification of misinformation on social media (Fournier, 2021; Ingram, 2021; Lewandowsky & Kozyreva, 2022). However, my findings indicate that this emphasis on algorithms and misinformation may result in users conversely associating the absence of algorithms with credible information. While scholars have focused on how the *presence* of content ranking algorithms on social media impacts news engagement and consumption (Powers, 2017; Swart, 2021), little attention has been paid to how the *absence* of algorithms on social media affects engagement with news and information, including information credibility evaluation. This may also differ across cultural and national contexts as there is a greater recognition in the Global

South that misinformation is often shared in non-algorithmically curated mediated spaces and places, particularly through private chats within mobile messaging services (Malhotra, 2020; Rossini, 2023; Valenzuela et al., 2021). Researchers can also further examine the underlying mechanisms that explain the relationship between the absence of algorithms and credibility. My findings indicate that it may be important to people's sense of personal identity that they surround themselves with trustworthy people. BSMPs make this identity-related aspect salient as they *encourage* explicit receiver-oriented personalization and allow users to personally control who they receive information from, unimpeded by algorithms.

Overall, I contribute to the literature on information credibility evaluation by detailing the heuristics people rely on to evaluate the credibility of information on BSMPs and examining how credibility evaluation differs across BSMPs and PESM. I find that credibility evaluation is a relational process and the perceived intimacy of BSMPs explains why people view information shared within these places as more credible. I also suggest new avenues for future research by revealing that the perceived accountability for sharing credible information within a mediated space or place and the absence of content ranking algorithms impact information credibility evaluation on social media.

8.6 Future of BSMPs

In this dissertation, I have conceptualized what bounded social media places (BSMPs) are and conducted empirical research to examine how people perceive, use, and are impacted by these places. As social media continues to change and evolve, it is important to end with some reflections on the potential future of BSMPs. I will focus on three different groups while discussing this future, namely social media users, companies, and researchers.

For social media users, the popularity of BSMPs *within* established platforms like

Facebook and Instagram may result in them continuing to maintain their accounts on these platforms. Researchers have argued that the reason users remain on such platforms is network effects, which refers to how the formation of a critical mass of users results in people continuing to use established social media platforms even as new platforms emerge (Allyn, 2023; Katona et al., 2011). My findings demonstrate that the popularity of BSMPs within established platforms also contributes to user retention. My interviews reveal that people rely heavily on BSMPs like private Facebook groups, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram DMs for various purposes, including maintaining interpersonal relationships and interacting with people who have shared interests and hobbies. In particular, private Facebook groups are often the preferred digital place where people can reach others in their neighborhood, parents at their children's school, or other parents of incoming undergraduates at a university. This means that even if an individual has a negative view of Meta as a company, especially in light of privacy and surveillance issues, they will have to maintain an account on Facebook to access private Facebook groups. And attempts to move such groups off of Facebook have utterly failed (Vara, 2023). In the future, it will be instructive to see if BSMPs within stand-alone smaller platforms and services like Signal will become more popular, or if platforms like Facebook and Instagram will continue to retain users because of the popularity of their BSMPs. Especially as younger generations in the U.S. are less likely to use Facebook (Vogels et al., 2022), geographically proximate and interest-based groups on other platforms and services like Discord and GroupMe may gain in popularity in the future.

It is also important to focus on what the popularity of these BSMPs will mean for big technology companies. My findings indicate that users value the lack of advertising and algorithmically-suggested content from brands and corporations on BSMPs. However, there is a risk that advertising will become part of BSMPs as it is unclear how companies intend to

monetize these places. Meta has attempted to monetize private chats on WhatsApp by allowing businesses to communicate directly with customers; however, this has led to users receiving an increasing amount of spam (Singh, 2022).

Another issue that technology companies will need to consider is content moderation on BSMPs. As my findings demonstrate, moderation on BSMPs is typically left to users who volunteer to be administrators or moderators within specific groups, channels, and communities. Yet, there have been calls for more company or platform-level moderation on BSMPs. For example, in the aftermath of the January 6 Capitol insurrection in 2021, Discord was pressured to remove private servers used by extremist communities (Allyn, 2021). However, for BSMPs that offer end-to-end encryption, moderation becomes more difficult, allowing such companies to shirk responsibility for hosting problematic content. Companies like Meta have framed their growing investment in encrypted private messaging as being driven by a concern for user privacy, obscuring how this enables them to avoid taking responsibility for moderation (Alvarez, 2019; Santos & Faure, 2018).

The increasing use of BSMPs also presents challenges for social media researchers, particularly regarding the methodological choices they make. As content posted on BSMPs is typically not directly accessible to researchers, it means that “scholars need to shift from the big-data mentality that has shaped the past two decades of digital media research and think creatively about research methodology” (Rossini, 2023, p. 2). This may result in an increase in the number of studies that formally adopt the scroll back method, which refers to asking interview participants to scroll back through their chats and posts on social media while answering questions (Robards & Lincoln, 2019), and the photo elicitation approach, wherein research participants share screenshots of their posts and messages for analysis (Harper, 2002; Li et al.,

2019). Regardless of which method becomes popular, future research on BSMPs will be user rather than content-centric. It will rely on users sharing what they post within BSMPs and/or describing their perceptions and experiences in relation to using different BSMPs.

My mixed methods dissertation offers a starting point for such research. I conceptualize BSMPs and reveal how they are perceived, especially in comparison to PESH. I detail how BSMPs *discourage* visibility and *encourage* personalization and synchronicity. Finally, I outline how these affordances lead to people perceiving BSMPs as intimate, also resulting in them viewing information shared within these places as credible.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

DO YOU USE . . .



- WhatsApp
- WeChat
- Telegram
- Line
- Private Facebook groups



I'D LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

Who qualifies?

Adults in the U.S. regularly using such apps/services

What is this study about?

How people use these apps/services, particularly to engage with information

What will participation involve?

A 1-hour interview with me via Zoom. You'll fill out two short Google forms beforehand

How will I be compensated?

A \$15 online gift card

How do I participate?

Email me at pranav23@uw.edu to set up an interview



Pranav Malhotra, University of Washington



pranav23@uw.edu

Appendix B: Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON ADULT CONSENT FORM

Bounded Social Media Places

Researcher:

Pranav Malhotra, Ph.D. Candidate
 Department of Communication, University of Washington –
 Seattle
 pranav23@uw.edu

RESEARCHER'S STATEMENT:

I am asking you to be in a University of Washington research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether you wish to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what we would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When I have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called “informed consent.” I will give you a copy of this form for your records.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

I am inviting you to participate in a research study to learn more about how people use communication channels like messaging apps and private groups. For example, how do people use apps like WhatsApp and Snapchat as well as private hidden groups on Facebook?

STUDY PROCEDURES:

In this study, you will participate in a one-on-one video interview on Zoom. This interview should take about an hour of your time. You will not be named in my study. Instead, your answers will be included with other people like you that I’m interviewing, with everyone’s names changed. You will be asked a number of questions about your use of technologies, particular messaging apps and closed groups. While I want you to be as candid and open as possible, you are under no obligation to speak about anything you feel uncomfortable about. If you do not feel like answering a question, you can tell me, and I will move on to a different question. You do not need to justify your refusal to answer anything. This will not cause any issues and will not affect your compensation in any way.

RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT:

Again, you are free to skip any question that makes you uncomfortable. As part of the study, I will video record these interviews and keep the recordings and transcripts indefinitely on a secure server in the United States. The transcripts of these interviews (with your names changed) may be shared with other researchers and excerpts will be used in studies presented at conferences and published in journals.

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY:

The results of this research may help us learn more about how people use messaging apps and closed groups. I hope that this work can help people better understand the impact of these technologies on our lives.

If you choose to participate in the interview, you will receive a \$15 gift card.

SOURCE OF FUNDING:

I am receiving financial support from the University of Washington's Department of Communication.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF RESEARCH INFORMATION:

I will be video recording these interviews. The recordings and transcripts will be stored on a secure server in the United States. You will only be identified by a pseudonym, or by characteristics, such as age, gender, and ethnicity

All of the information you provide during this study will be kept confidential. However, if we learn that you intend to harm yourself or others, or that if we learn of child abuse, we must report that to the authorities.

Government or university staff sometimes review studies such as this one to make sure they are being done safely and legally. If a review of this study takes place, your records may be examined. The reviewers will protect your privacy. The study records will not be used to put you at legal risk of harm.

OTHER INFORMATION:

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

We also reserve the right to request that you withdraw from the study at any time, should your participation pose a problem to the conduct of the research (e.g., misbehavior) or you pose a difficulty to the conduct of the research.

Name of researcher obtaining consent: Pranav Malhotra Subject's statement:

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later about the research, or if I feel I have been harmed by participating in this study, I can contact the researcher listed on the first page of this consent form. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can call the Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

1. In the write-up of the research, it is possible that things that you said in the interview will

be used to illustrate a point, either as a direct quote or a paraphrase. As such, I'd like you to select a pseudonym, a fake name, that will be used to refer to you in the study. By fake name, I do not mean Boaty McBoatface, but rather a name of your choice that you feel reflects your identity. If you cannot think of one, some people select a name that their parents considered but did not select. Other people use their middle name or a cousin's name. And for your information, if multiple participants select the same or a similar name, I may have to use a different name. Please type in your chosen pseudonym below.

2. Do you provide consent for being interviewed as part of this study?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I need more information

Appendix C: Pre-Interview Questions

Please answer these questions related to your demographic details and social media use before we begin our interview.

1. Type in the pseudonym you chose in the consent form.
2. Type in your age.
3. Type in your gender.
4. Type in your race/ ethnicity.
5. Type in your primary occupation.
6. For each of the following apps and services, indicate your level of use.

Mark only one oval per row.

	Don't use	Once a month	Once a week	Most y days	Dail
FB Messenger	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
FB Groups	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Snapchat	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Telegram	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
WhatsApp	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
WeChat	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Signal	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Viber	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
iMessage	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
KakaoTalk	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

GroupMe	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
YouTube	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Twitter	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
LinkedIn	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Instagram	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Reddit	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
TikTok	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Opening Questions

Walk me through your use of technology on a daily basis. What kind of apps and platforms do you typically use to communicate with other people? Tell me more about how you use them and who you are communicating with.

Are there any differences between these apps and platforms? If so, what are the main differences in your view? Give me a few examples of some differences.

[Follow up with the BSMP-specific questions below if they mention a specific channel that falls under BSMP. If not, ask: On Prolific, you indicated you use BSMP X. I wanted to ask you a few questions about that.]

BSMP Questions [For many of these questions, be sure to follow up with Is this different from other social media platforms and channels you use to communicate? If so, how? If they have mentioned using more than one channel that falls under the definition of BSMP, try and ask about that as a follow up and see if there are differences]

Walk me through your use of BSMP X.

When do you use it and who do you communicate with on it? Who is your audience on X?

If someone asked you to use an adjective to describe how you use X, what would you use? Tell me more about why.

[If they don't say intimate or a word similar in meaning to intimate] Some people also say that the adjective they would use to describe X is intimate. Do you agree? If so, what makes them intimate? If not, why do you think they are not intimate?

Visibility

Who do you think sees the content you post? Who do you imagine as your audience?

What people and other entities do you think have access to the messages and content you post in one-to-one and/to group interactions?

Tell me about the control you have over who sees the content that is shared on X.

Can you think of a time when something you posted had a big reaction? Tell me more about it.

Personalization

Thinking about all the content you see on X, talk to me about the degree to which it is relevant to your interests.

Can you give me an example of some recent content that you felt was relevant to you? And explain to me why.

Can you give me an example of some recent content that you felt was NOT relevant to you? And explain to me why.

So, let's flip to talking about your own posting... when you post content on X, we already talked about how you feel like your audience is XXXXX. But I imagine that there are sub-audiences within that. Can you talk to me about an example of a time when you posted content to X, and you had a particular target audience in mind, and tell me about that process and if you feel like you reached that target.

That's a great example. So, in thinking about X, especially versus other social media platforms you use, do you feel like there is anything specific about X that made it easier or even harder to reach your target with that content?

Synchronicity

Of course different platforms and different technologies have various expectations about when someone is going to reply back. Like an email is different from a text message, etc. So let's talk about that a bit.

On X, tell me about what you think is typical for expectations for responding to a message or post? And perhaps let's talk about if someone was tagged versus just a general message separately.

So if the norm is REPEAT BACK WHAT THEY SAID, SUMMARIZED, can you think of some exceptions to that norm? And also what happens if someone doesn't reply back in that expected time frame.

So, given what you've explained about THE SUMMARY OF WHAT THEY SAID FOR X, can you talk a bit about how this is different from the other platforms you use and the expectations there?

Multimediality

So on X, obviously people can type text, but there are also other ways that people communicate - like with photos, gifs, emoji, stickers, etc. Can you talk to me about the various ways that you communicate on X and give me some examples of under what circumstances you use one over the other?

Thanks, you did a great job explaining about your own sending. What about the people with whom you communicate? What kind of communication do they use on X?

General Questions [Might yield emergent affordances]

Now that we've talked about your use of X, I'd like you to reflect a bit more on where X sort of fits into your broader life. So, for example, thinking back to the time before X existed versus now, what does X mean for your life in terms of your personal relationships, your work, etc. .

Those were really good examples. Do you feel like there are aspects of X that have specifically had this impact? Tell me about that.

If there's one thing you could change about X, what would it be and why?

Credibility

To change the topic a little and look at one specific aspect of using X... You know that people do share news and other information on X, so I wanted to ask you a bit about how you assess the believability of information you see on X, especially versus other places that you get information.

So, tell me about a time that someone shared some information on X - this could be *anything* - and walk me through your mental process.

What kind of things do you look for in content that is shared on X when you're considering if it is believable[use the phrase the participant used - like legit, credible, etc.] or not?

That's great. In describing how XXXX impacts the way that you assess credibility, is this different at all if the information comes in a different format, like text versus video, etc. If so, how and why?

That's really helpful. Can you tell me a bit about how the *person* that posts the information impacts your assessment of the believability.

Super. Can you give me an example of a time that the person, their identity, etc. impacted the way you viewed the believability?

Can you think of a time when you saw something and thought it was false? Tell me more about this. What do you think helped you in judging it as false? Did it eventually turn out to be false?

Can you think of a time when you saw something and thought it was true but you later found out it was false? Tell me more about this. Why do think you initially thought it was true?

Another factor is that it isn't just you and the one information sharer on X that are seeing that information, but there are other people in the group. How do those other people impact the way that

So with all of these processes that you've described when you're assessing believability, tell me about what is specific to X versus other platforms that you use, in terms of how your processes may be different.

End of Interview

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix E: Experiment Instructions

Low Visibility Condition Instruction

Social Media Platform Description

A new social media platform called GroupConnect allows users to create profiles with their real names and join groups to connect with others as well as share news and information. Like other social media platforms, users can post text, images, and videos as status updates, in one-to-one chats, and within groups.

What should be noted about this platform:

Similar to Facebook groups, users can be part of **private groups**. Only users that are members of the group can see and access the group through searching for its name on the platform. Users can only join a **private group** if they are invited by an existing member and approved by an administrator. **Only group members can see and comment on the posts made within the group.**

A button to go to the next page will appear within 30 seconds. **Once you click the button, you will be shown a post from one of these private groups. Please imagine that you are a member of this private group and read the post.** After this, please answer some questions about the post, the poster, and the group. **Please do not search for answers online; if you are unsure of an answer please just make your best guess.**

High Visibility Condition Instructions

Social Media Platform Description

A new social media platform called GroupConnect allows users to create profiles with their real names and join groups to connect with others as well as share news and information. Like other social media platforms, users can post text, images, and videos as status updates, in one-to-one chats, and within groups.

What should be noted about this platform:

Similar to Facebook groups, users can be part of **public groups**. Anyone can find these groups through searching the group name on the platform or a search engine, like Google. Any user with a profile on the platform is able to join these **public groups** and the posts made within the group are visible to anyone. **This means that even users who are not group members can see and comment on these posts.**

A button to go to the next page will appear within 30 seconds. **Once you click the button, you will be shown a post from one of these public groups. Please imagine that you are a member of this public group and read the post.** After this, please answer some questions about the post, the poster, and the group. **Please do not search for answers online; if you are unsure of an answer please just make your best guess.**

Appendix F: Experimental Stimuli

Low Visibility-Cancer Topic












Cancer Awareness and Information

Private Group



Alex B
just now

There's hope.

Dostarlimab, an experimental cancer drug, appears to have cured every patient in its clinical trial in the US.

After taking Dostarlimab for six months, the 12 patients with rectal cancer entered remission.

After the patients stopped the medication, the cancer had vanished. Unlike chemo drugs, there were no significant side-effects reported.

Private
Only members approved by the group administrator can join and see what is posted in the group

Hidden
Only existing members can find the group.

About
This group is a place to share information and knowledge about causes and treatments for cancer. Please do not post any spam or advertisements. Everyone has the right to share their opinion but please be respectful and civil if you disagree with other members of the group.

Low Visibility-Plants Topic












Houseplants Information & Discussion

Private Group



Alex B
just now

If you live in a noisy neighborhood, adding some plants to your home can help!

Leaves can actually absorb and deflect sound waves so you can get a mix of plants with different leaves to help reduce noise levels in your home.

Private
Only members approved by the group administrator can join and see what is posted in the group

Hidden
Only existing members can find the group.

About
This group is a place to share information and knowledge about houseplants. Please do not post any spam or advertisements. Everyone has the right to share their opinion but please be respectful and civil if you disagree with other members of the group.

High Visibility-Cancer Topic












Cancer Awareness and Information

 Public Group



Alex B
 just now

There's hope.

Dostarlimab, an experimental cancer drug, appears to have cured every patient in its clinical trial in the US.

After taking Dostarlimab for six months, the 12 patients with rectal cancer entered remission.

After the patients stopped the medication, the cancer had vanished. Unlike chemo drugs, there were no significant side-effects reported.

 **Public**
 Anyone can see who's in the group and what they post.

 **Visible**
 Anyone can find this group.

About
 This group is a place to share information and knowledge about causes and treatments for cancer. Please do not post any spam or advertisements. Everyone has the right to share their opinion but please be respectful and civil if you disagree with other members of the group.

High Visibility-Plants Topic












Houseplants Information & Discussion

 Public Group



Alex B
 just now

If you live in a noisy neighborhood, adding some plants to your home can help!

Leaves can actually absorb and deflect sound waves so you can get a mix of plants with different leaves to help reduce noise levels in your home.

 **Public**
 Anyone can see who's in the group and what they post.

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 This group is a place to share information and knowledge about houseplants. Please do not post any spam or advertisements. Everyone has the right to share their opinion but please be respectful and civil if you disagree with other members of the group.