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Affected and Intrinsic Authenticity: Navigating Internalized Gay Ageism on LGBTQ+ Homestay Platforms

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ABSTRACT

In our paper, we draw on 14 in-depth interviews with 11 self-identified gay men aged 50–74 years who host on LGBTQ+ homestay platforms. We examine how they navigate the interplay of age, gender, and sexuality through claims of authenticity, highlighting how these hosts manage authenticity amidst normative expectations and shedding light on identity dynamics for marginalized groups. Our analysis reveals the complexities of authenticity in self-presentation, highlighting tensions between personal identity and societal, gendered, and age-related expectations, as well as the perceived gap between inclusivity claims and actual experiences. We also explore the intersection of economic necessity and identity negotiation. We find that older hosts may adjust their presentation to align with beauty norms or market pressures, prioritizing affected authenticity to increase their chances of securing bookings. We distinguish between affected and intrinsic authenticity, showing how hosts adapt their presentation to external demands in specific contexts, while potentially maintaining intrinsic authenticity elsewhere. This framework offers insights for future research on how societal pressures and economic factors influence authenticity claims, exploring the balance between affected and intrinsic authenticity and its implications for individual agency and organizational dynamics.

1 | Introduction

Although LGBTQ+ individuals typically constitute a minority in the workplace, the rise of platform work—particularly through LGBTQ+ -focused homestay platforms—presents new opportunities (Aspinall 2009). Examples include Gay Homestays and misterb&b, which function similarly to mainstream platforms such as Airbnb. These platforms aim to provide a safe space for hosts of diverse sexual and gender identities, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning), and supportive allies, to rent accommodations such as spare rooms, sofas, and entire homes (Medina-Hernandez, Marine-Roig, and Ferrer-Rosell 2020; Pawlicz 2020). Although platform work faces criticism for poor working conditions (Eurofound 2019), it

can also be a positive alternative for marginalized individuals, providing a sense of belonging and authenticity (Maier and Gilchrist 2022). The influence of heteronormativity in daily organizational life presents a significant challenge for LGBTQ+ individuals, impacting their sense of workplace belonging (Benozzo et al. 2015; Ozbilgin et al. 2023; Ozturk, Rumens, and Tatli 2020; Soini 2022). Heteronormativity, which assumes heterosexuality as the standard, marginalizes relationships and behaviors that deviate from this norm, labeling them as abnormal or deviant. Heteronormative attitudes can also be internalized by LGBTQ+ individuals, adding layers of complexity to efforts aimed at fostering acceptance and inclusivity for LGBTQ+ people. It is thus unsurprising that Stone-wall (2018), the Trades Union Congress (2023), and the

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Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2021), among others, emphasize the criticality of authenticity in the workplace. Their advocacy extends to urging for a more comprehensive understanding of how LGBTQ+ individuals perceive and navigate authenticity at work. For LGBTQ+ workers, authenticity is not merely about self-expression; it has significant stakes, impacting their well-being, job satisfaction, and sense of belonging. The ability to be one's true self without fear of discrimination or the need to conform to heteronormative expectations can directly influence both mental health and work engagement (Cable, Gino, and Staats 2013; Emmerich and Rigotti 2017; Kifer et al. 2013).

Acknowledging this, we propose that LGBTQ+ homestay platforms provide a compelling setting to reassess authenticity, as they offer hosts with experiences—outwith a standard labor politics—that are more aligned with LGBTQ+ individuals' identities. These platforms aim to provide hosts with opportunities to manage their identities in ways that challenge the limitations often found in traditional work environments. Unlike traditional workplaces, where LGBTQ+ individuals may feel pressured to downplay their identities to conform to heteronormative expectations, LGBTQ+ homestay platforms strive to foster environments where diverse identities are central to the platform's missions. By doing so, they seek to enable hosts to explore authenticity within a context that aspires to be more inclusive and supportive.

In this paper, we explore the experiences of self-identified gay men aged 50–74 years who have worked as hosts on LGBTQ+ homestay platforms. We examine the complex interplay of age, gender, and sexuality, using authenticity as a lens to explore how hosts navigate claims-making in response to ageism. Here, authenticity is seen as the harmony between an individual's external presentation and internal identity, embodying genuine expression free from external pressures (Cha et al. 2019). Ageism is defined as discrimination against older individuals (Minichiello, Browne, and Hal 2000; Wilkinson and Ferraro 2002), embedded throughout the labor market, from policy dialog to workplace “banter” (Vickerstaff and van der Horst 2021). As aging carries a negative stigma, older individuals may distance themselves from this perception, highlighting internalized ageism (Levy 2009). The literature on internalized gay ageism shows that it, along with internalized homophobia, can lead to feelings of devaluation and invisibility among older gay men (Lyons et al. 2022; Wight et al. 2015; Willis, Vickery, and Jessiman 2022). To counter these effects, the literature suggests that gay men assert claims of an authentic self (Simpson 2015). However, we foreground how internal authenticity interacts with the pressures and expectations surrounding authenticity on LGBTQ+ homestay platforms, questioning authenticity's integrity. In our analysis, we introduce affected authenticity as strategic self-presentation adjustments made by hosts to navigate societal, cultural, and platform-specific pressures, while potentially maintaining intrinsic authenticity—an enduring sense of one's true self—within other domains. This distinction shows how authenticity functions both as a dynamic response to external demands and as a stable trait, highlighting the complexity of identity negotiation and challenging prevailing views of authenticity and claims-making.

2 | Identity Intersections and the Complexity of Ageism

The intersection of age, gender, and sexuality shapes a composite identity, where individuals grapple with intertwined systems of advantage and disadvantage. These systems interact to either reinforce or challenge societal norms, often placing individuals in complex positions of privilege and marginalization simultaneously. For example, Calasanti and Slevin (2001) shed light on the nature of aging experiences, demonstrating their profound variability influenced by factors such as class and sexuality. Their work highlights how age is not experienced uniformly; instead, it intersects with other identity markers, leading to vastly different aging trajectories. Likewise, West and Fenstermaker (1995) emphasize the role of gender constructs in perpetuating structural inequalities, shaping individuals' opportunities, and reinforcing prevailing power dynamics. By underscoring how gender intersects with other social categories, their work suggests that identities are not static but are continuously shaped by and shape societal structures. Furthermore, Rich (2007) explores the dynamic relationship between gender and sexuality, exposing how heteronormative ideals and compulsory heterosexuality intersect to govern social norms and expectations, adding layers of complexity to identity formation throughout the lifespan. In Butler's (1990) terms, this forms part of the “heterosexual matrix,” a concept that captures how norms surrounding age, gender, and sexuality intersect to shape structural dynamics and individual experiences. This framework illustrates the challenges faced by individuals deviating from heteronormativity, particularly as they navigate societal expectations that often marginalize non-hegemonic identities (Mara, Ginieis, and Brunet-Icart 2021; Mattheis, De Arellano, and Yoder 2019).

Building on this, Riach, Rumens, and Tyler (2014) expand the discussion with chrononormativity—norms about time that shape workplace experiences by enforcing conformity to “acceptable” timelines tied to heteronormative ideals, such as completing education, achieving career milestones, marrying, having children, and retiring (Freeman 2010). These expectations privilege those who follow conventional trajectories while pressuring individuals to navigate temporal norms influenced by intersecting assumptions about gender roles, sexual identity, and professional pathways (Ainsworth and Hardy 2008, 2009; Duncan and Loretto 2004). For LGBTQ+ individuals, societal pressures to align with normative timelines—such as marrying or having children—often clash with their lived realities. Structural barriers such as discriminatory laws, non-traditional family structures, or alternative relational norms can make these milestones inaccessible or irrelevant. In terms of standard labor politics, such timelines are often equated with stability and commitment, forcing LGBTQ+ individuals to navigate tensions between authenticity and societal expectations to fit conventional standards. By resisting or conforming, they navigate a matrix that both reinforces and challenges heteronormative standards through non-conforming self-expression, openly discussing alternative trajectories, or redefining success by prioritizing chosen families, career ambitions, or community activism (Ozturk, Rumens, and Tatli 2020). Nonetheless, these norms present significant challenges for LGBTQ+ individuals, who often feel compelled to conform to heteronormative

standards to align with conventional workplace expectations, revealing the profound impact of these intersections on workplace identity.

Aging brings distinct societal expectations and stereotypes, including caregiving responsibilities and assumptions about productivity, competence, or attractiveness, all of which contribute to workplace discrimination. In the classical literature, R. Butler (1969) explains how middle-aged individuals shoulder caregiving responsibilities for both younger and older age groups, thereby exposing them to ageist prejudices. In the contemporary literature, ageism has a broader directional scope, yet it predominantly refers to discrimination aimed at older individuals, embracing the prevailing notion that aging is associated with declining attractiveness, intelligence, sexual appeal, and productivity (Mannheim et al. 2019; Ng et al. 2015; Wilkinson and Ferraro 2002). At the same time, for many men, aging can confer status and authority both socially and within organizations, as older men are often perceived as more experienced, wise, and capable of leadership (Bowman et al. 2017; Foweraker and Cutcher 2015; Thompson 2018). The privileges conferred by aging often hinge on adherence to heteronormative life stages, equating traditional family structures with stability and commitment. In platform work, where success often depends on guest ratings and reputation systems, biases can manifest in unique ways (Breidbach and Brodie 2017). Guests may favor hosts for example who appear to align with traditional life stages, perceiving them as more reliable or trustworthy. For older gay men, whose lives may deviate from these norms, this can lead to reduced opportunities and lower ratings, reinforcing exclusion. Such dynamics amplify heteronormative biases, as user preferences shape access to success and visibility within platform ecosystems.

In this complex landscape, the concept of “heteroprofessionalism” sheds light on how non-heteronormative identities are systematically suppressed in the workplace (Mizzi 2013). This construct not only reveals the clashes arising from the convergence of sexuality and professional expectations but also underscores the pervasive influence of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). For example, aging men may encounter expectations around attractiveness and productivity tied to traditional masculinity, which often marginalizes those who do not embody traits such as strength and virility (Messerschmidt 2018). Effemophobia compounds this, rooted in the fear of effeminacy in men and its historical association with homosexuality (Sinfield 1994). As individuals age, the pressure to conform to hegemonic masculinity can intensify, exacerbating effemophobia and marginalizing those who deviate from traditional gender roles. This pressure often suppresses subcultural values where non-conforming identities may be celebrated, arising from an acute awareness of how gender non-conformance might be perceived by the straight-majority society. Consequently, individuals may experience internal conflict, where fear of societal reaction, particularly from those upholding heteronormative standards, leads to self-censorship (Bittner and Matos 2016). On platforms, where visibility and ratings are paramount, users (e.g., hosts) self-regulate their presentation and behavior to pre-empt punitive responses from guests who valorize traditional gender norms, perpetuating broader patterns of gender- and sexuality-based discrimination (Annes and Redlin 2012). These pressures force

individuals to navigate identity conflicts, balancing authenticity with societal expectations, and highlighting the pervasive influence of social norms on inclusion and self-expression.

3 | Internalized Ageism and Claims-Making to Authenticity

Age-based discrimination can become internalized as individuals assimilate stereotypes about older individuals throughout their lives (Levy 2009). This internalization often leads older individuals to actively distance themselves from being labeled as “old,” as they do not align with the negative stereotypes associated with aging (Ng et al. 2015). Furthermore, when individuals perceive themselves as not being able to keep up with expectations, they may attribute it to their age, viewing it as a personal failure rather than acknowledging broader social factors. For instance, rather than questioning the adequacy of workplace training programs, they may internalize the notion that they are inherently less capable due to their age (e.g., an older individual might attribute difficulty learning new software to their age rather than inadequate employer training) (Minichiello, Browne, and Hal 2000). This self-blame lowers self-esteem and deters older individuals from seeking accommodations or advocating for themselves. The effects of internalized ageism extend beyond self-perception, with research indicating it can significantly impact physical and mental health, contributing to outcomes such as increased stress, depression, and even reduced life expectancy (Swift et al. 2017). Over time, the psychological burden of viewing oneself through a lens of negative age stereotypes can lead to heightened risks of cardiovascular disease, weakened immune response, and overall decline in well-being. In extreme cases, internalized ageism has been linked to earlier mortality, as the cumulative impact of stress and lowered self-worth takes a toll on longevity and quality of life.

Highlighting the potential for internalized ageism to intersect with gender and sexual identities, Cronin and King (2010) emphasize the varied experiences of aging among LGBTQ+ individuals. For instance, Wight et al. (2015) delineate how internalized gay ageism combines ageism and homophobia, leading to feelings of devaluation and social invisibility. In their ideation, internalized gay ageism is upheld twofold: firstly, by a sense of accelerated aging, where gay men feel older than their years (Grant et al. 2010; Schope 2005); and secondly, by a harmful stereotype associating homosexuality with pedophilia (Knauer 2009). This double bind reflects societal attitudes that pressure older gay men to adhere to unrealistic standards of youthfulness while also stigmatizing their very existence. Providing additional insight, Willis, Vickery, and Jessiman (2022) explore the challenges faced by older gay men in coping with feelings of isolation and disconnection, accentuating the role of expectations and age-related biases within specific social contexts (e.g., workplaces and social clubs) in fostering internalized gay ageism. These social environments often reinforce stereotypes, subtly pressuring older gay men to either conform to expected behaviors or risk further marginalization. Consequently, older gay men may encounter heightened obstacles in establishing meaningful social bonds and receiving affirmation. Lyons

et al. (2022) add that poorer mental health outcomes among those facing compounding stigma emphasize the significance of authenticity and self-acceptance in mitigating the detrimental effects of norms and prejudices on well-being among LGBTQ+ individuals.

Recognizing the importance of authenticity in shaping identity and identity work, Cha et al. (2019) draw a distinction between experienced authenticity and perceived authenticity in organizational contexts, emphasizing its dual nature as both a trait and a state. This highlights the benefits of experienced authenticity, such as improved well-being and work engagement (Cable, Gino, and Staats 2013; Emmerich and Rigotti 2017; Kifer et al. 2013), while acknowledging the challenges individuals face when their authenticity expressions conflict with organizational norms (Ghumman and Ryan 2013; Opie and Phillips 2015). Despite this weight, Hewlin et al. (2020, 81) draw attention to the unknowns of “when, why, and how authenticity is experienced, achieved, observed, and is desirable.” For instance, Simpson (2015) suggests that authenticity can be mobilized as a form of resistance against internalized ageism among gay men. Through confronting societal expectations and internalized ageism by asserting their true selves, individuals challenge perceptions by embracing their identities in a process called claims-making to authenticity. In organizational contexts, this process serves to both reinforce existing cultures and highlight the resources individuals utilize to assert their distinction. To elaborate, Simpson (2016) finds organizations to be “empowering spaces” where men assert authenticity by demonstrating workplace “age-appropriateness” or embracing aging openly, yet also fostering intergenerational conflicts, reflecting the complexity of authenticity in different settings. However, this nascent literature emphasizes the agentic capacity of claims-making while downplaying the interplay between internal feelings of authenticity and external social factors. Such factors include the aforementioned suppression of non-heteronormative identities and the marginalization of those who deviate from traditional gender roles.

With this context in mind, our study reexamines claims-making to authenticity as a means of navigating internalized ageism. We consider how individuals navigate societal norms that often marginalize those with intersecting identities of age, gender, and sexuality. By exploring these intersections, we investigate how individuals assert their authenticity to either resist or adapt to these constraints. We aim to illuminate how these processes shape one's ability to claim and maintain an authentic self. Our research thus sheds light on the broader implications of identity management as LGBTQ+ individuals contend with societal norms that may otherwise restrict their self-expression and professional engagement.

4 | Methods

In this paper, we draw on insights from 14 in-depth interviews with 11 self-identified gay men aged 50–74 years; all participants were assigned male at birth and identified as male, thus excluding trans men from the sample. These individuals were hosts on LGBTQ+ homestay platforms, categorically referred to as “older

hosts” according to policy narratives in the United Kingdom (UK) that define older workers as individuals aged 50 years and beyond (Taylor and Earl 2016). We justify the sample size twofold: firstly, as “small-N interview research is a well-accepted feature of LGBT organizational scholarship” (Ozturk, Rumens, and Tatli 2020, 1257); and secondly, given the depth and richness of the data obtained from the interviews, we felt confident that we had gathered ample data to proceed with our analysis. Recognizing the challenges associated with accessing LGBTQ+ homestay platform hosts, we employed maximum variation sampling. This method ensured the selection of participants representing a breadth of cases, including diverse factors such as income and geographic location (Bryman 2016).

Through a gerontological lens, 10 participants belonged to the “young-old” aggregate (50–64 years), one participant belonged to the “old” aggregate (65–74 years), and no participants belonged to the “old-old” aggregate (75 years and beyond) (Cronin and King 2010). This reflects the scarcity of hosts aged 65 years and beyond on LGBTQ+ homestay platforms. All participants lived and worked in urban areas in the UK, including Belfast, Glasgow, and London. This reflects the niche segment of hosts located in rural areas on LGBTQ+ homestay platforms. Four out of 11 participants identified as minority ethnic. Three participants reported as working class and eight as middle class. This reflects the significance of having the necessary capital to become a host, which includes the essential requirement of having adequate space to accommodate guests. All participants used the platform misterb&b, and six used or had used other platforms, including Gay Homestays. The accommodations offered by participants were a mix of “private room” and “entire place” listings. While LGBTQ+ homestay platforms offer accommodations in which eroticism may be inferred, such as “clothing optional” listings, our study focused on “standard” listings, in which no specific type of sociality is implied or expected beyond conventional host-guest interactions. By “standard,” we refer to listings where the anticipated sociality includes general activities such as checking in, providing visitor information, and responding to guest queries.

To recruit participants, we utilized the messaging function of LGBTQ+ homestay platforms to distribute an information sheet to potential participants. To obtain ethical approval from Northumbria University for the study conducted in 2022, interviews were conducted via Zoom. Interviews typically lasted between one and 2 hours, with questions focusing on motivations for hosting, identity and authenticity, personal experiences of ageism, and intergenerational relations. After the 11 initial interviews, three follow-up interviews were completed for clarification, which included the addition of new information, including rising living costs (Keith Neal and Neal 2022). Interviews were recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed.

Two participants requested a debrief call, both of whom were signposted to Age UK (a charity offering a variety of services for older individuals) and LGBT Foundation (a charity delivering advice, support, and information services to LGBT individuals) for information and support. These calls were offered due to the potentially sensitive nature of the study, which involved participants reflecting on topics such as discrimination and temporality.

5 | Analysis

Our analysis is centered around four key themes: authenticity and the regulation of identity; age, gender norms, and claims to authenticity; navigating authenticity amid inclusivity rhetoric; and economic necessity and the shaping of authenticity. These themes emerge from a comprehensive study on subjectivities and identity formation within LGBTQ+ homestay platforms. Using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), we began with open coding to identify significant patterns and ideas, followed by focused coding to group similar concepts, such as “authenticity under pressure,” “ageism,” and “economic survival.” This process helped us understand how claims to authenticity are made, particularly as a means of navigating ageism. These themes not only shape the conclusions of this paper but also offer a template for future research on identity formation in similar settings.

5.1 | Authenticity and the Regulation of Identity

The first theme introduces the complex balance individuals strike between their authentic selves and societal expectations, uncovering the tensions inherent in expressing authenticity in response to implicit platform pressures and social norms. The data reveals a preference among some participants for a “more understated esthetic,” which refers to a style that is perceived as understated, approachable, and genuine, as opposed to what they see as a more flamboyant or expressive presentation. This esthetic reflects a desire to present themselves in a manner that feels true to their everyday identity, rather than adopting styles that might be seen as exaggerated or performative. As Participant 6 notes,

I know it's problematic, but you see other hosts all dolled up, wearing makeup. Even if it's just a profile picture, maybe that's how they like to express themselves, but it gives the impression of not being your everyday self. This isn't a pride parade or a social platform.

Participant 6's response reflects a notably negative tone, expressing a preference for styles aligned with traditional masculinity while discouraging presentations perceived as overtly feminine or flamboyant. This highlights the tensions hosts can experience between external expectations of authenticity and their identity, as certain styles are perceived as less aligned with platform ideals. The suggestion here is that maintaining a rugged, understated esthetic is somehow more authentic, casting judgment on those who diverge from this approach. This perspective is notably harsh, positioning a reserved style as the standard and implicitly devaluing other forms of expression. By positioning a traditional masculine style as more genuine, these comments highlight how individuals can perpetuate restrictive norms, even in spaces that aim to be diverse and inclusive, ultimately limiting the range of self-expression deemed acceptable. This dynamic demonstrates how some hosts internalize these pressures, reproducing restrictive norms within their claims to authenticity.

Similarly, Participant 3 expresses a preference for a simple, straightforward style, saying,

I'm all for self-expression, but I don't see the need to put on a lot of flair. There's value in looking like your everyday self, rather than presenting an image that feels exaggerated. You see others going all out with makeup and flashy clothes, but to me, that doesn't seem genuine. It's about being comfortable and true to who you are without putting on a show.

This reflects Participant 3's effort to balance personal authenticity with external perceptions, particularly in shaping how they are received by guests. Their emphasis on being “comfortable and true” underscores the emotional significance they attach to hosting as a reflection of their identity, where simplicity serves as a deliberate strategy to align self-expression with both personal values and expectations.

Examining these participants' comments reveals a shared desire for authenticity in their self-presentation, as they both express discomfort with presenting a version of themselves that feels exaggerated or misaligned with their everyday identity. Their preference for a “no-fuss” esthetic, rather than a more expressive style, highlights the complexity of negotiating identity within platforms' perceived expectations of authenticity. This reflects broader challenges faced by individuals navigating intersecting pressures of age, masculinity, and self-expression (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Their subdued esthetic may be influenced by implicit pressures to conform to traditional presentations aligned with marketability and guest expectations, where deviations from gender norms can lead to marginalization and discrimination (Annes and Redlin 2012; Mizzi 2013). Additionally, this restrained masculinity serves a market purpose, appealing to guests who may prefer a traditional, approachable presence over more flamboyant expressions. Their responses illustrate how authenticity is deeply connected with the visual aspects of gender expression. These pressures to self-regulate reveal platforms' role in mediating claims to authenticity as hosts balance perceived market demands with their identities (Simpson 2015).

It is worth noting that the participants' preference for a “no-fuss” esthetic may reflect an internalized response to perceived norms that valorize traditional masculinity, suggesting an underlying concern with how they might be perceived in ways that align with dominant esthetic norms. This anticipation of punitive responses may lead them to engage in a form of self-censorship, consciously avoiding expressions that might seem too flamboyant or non-conforming (Bittner and Matos 2016). While LGBTQ+ homestay platforms might be expected to provide a space for greater freedom of self-expression, participants' choices suggest that implicit esthetic expectations could persist, even within these ostensibly inclusive settings. This tension illustrates how external pressures could extend even into queer spaces, as participants navigate a landscape where their masculinity is shaped through both internal and external regulation, despite platforms' intended celebration of diverse identities. Thus, it raises questions about the extent to which truly inclusive environments allow for the rejection of external expectations, even among those who seek refuge from them.

5.2 | Age, Gender Norms, and Claims to Authenticity

The second theme delves into the nuanced intersectionality of age, gender norms, and the implicit pressures surrounding authenticity, examining the complexities hosts face when negotiating authenticity within these social constructs. The data reveals a tension between maintaining an authentic self and conforming to traditional ideals of gender and aging. As Participant 2 reflects,

I think we all experience some level of internalized homophobia. I scope out the competition occasionally and wonder why. I see other hosts around my age with their hair dyed unnatural colors, and it feels a bit inauthentic to me. I understand that it's gendered—it's less unusual to see older women doing this—but I still feel it might put potential guests off. Why not just embrace getting older?

Participant 2's reflection on internalized homophobia resonates with the discussion surrounding the dual internalization of ageism (Wight et al. 2015). This self-regulation, shaped by internalized biases, reflects how hosts assess their peers' authenticity within perceived platform ideals. Additionally, their observations about the gendered nature of expressive self-representation point to how gendered expectations shape claims to be authentic. They observe that such practices seem more typical for older women, emphasizing the nuanced challenges older individuals encounter while navigating expectations tied to age, gender, and authenticity (Messerschmidt 2018). At its core, this perspective highlights that identity is not fixed but is instead in a constant state of flux, shaped by the interplay between personal authenticity and external pressures. As individuals navigate these complexities, they negotiate the challenge of reconciling authenticity with implicit platform and market expectations, where aligning with norms of acceptability can simultaneously enable participation and constrain self-expression (Cha et al. 2019).

Participant 7 raises a thought-provoking question that addresses fundamental issues of authenticity, identity, and acceptance among LGBTQ+ individuals:

■ Which queers get to be their true selves?

By questioning who truly has the privilege and opportunity to express themselves authentically, they highlight the inequalities and barriers faced by different identities. This question also underscores the ongoing struggles for visibility, validation, and inclusion, making it a crucial inquiry for understanding the complexities of LGBTQ+ experiences:

The following reflection from Participant 10 expands on the inquiry raised by advocating for the liberation of LGBTQ+ individuals from the implicit constraints of social and market norms. This sentiment aligns with Participant 7's question about the privilege and opportunity for self-expression:

I've never questioned my sex or gender; I'm happy living as a man. Just because I don't identify as she/he

or non-binary doesn't mean I should be confined to heteronormative models of masculinity. I avoid using Airbnb because I prefer to think LGBT + alternatives are more inclusive. They usually are, but they're not all rainbows either.

Participant 10 affirms their sense of authenticity and contentment with their gender identity while also challenging rigid notions of masculinity, arguing that identifying as a man should not mean confinement to these restrictive ideals. Their choice to use LGBTQ+ alternatives over mainstream platforms such as Airbnb reflects a commitment to fostering inclusivity and acceptance. However, by noting that these platforms are “not all rainbows,” Participant 10 hints at the persistent issues of effeminophobia and gender policing within LGBTQ+ spaces (Annes and Redlin 2012). This suggests that while these platforms aim to be inclusive, they still reflect some of the same pressures toward gender expression that exist in broader society, where non-traditional expressions can be met with judgment or marginalization. This acknowledgment of the limitations within supposedly inclusive spaces highlights the ongoing struggle for authenticity among LGBTQ+ hosts, who often find themselves navigating environments that simultaneously promote acceptance while enforcing conformity.

The participants' reflections reveal the complex process of negotiating identity, particularly regarding authenticity and gender expression. Their desire for genuine self-representation highlights ongoing tensions with implicit pressures tied to gender and market expectations. Within the framework of claims-making to authenticity, participants' skepticism toward expressive self-presentation, especially among older hosts, underscores the challenge of navigating these tensions, often influenced by aging. This complexity shines a light on effeminophobia, which underpins narratives that marginalize individuals who stray from traditional gender expressions. For instance, Participants 6 and 2 convey entrenched biases against expressions of femininity or deviations from conventional masculinity, implying that feminine expressions are seen as inappropriate or out of place. These preferences highlight how internalized norms shape the regulation of authenticity, with hosts managing their self-presentation to conform to market and social expectations. Nonetheless, participants also challenge these norms by questioning who has the privilege and opportunity for self-expression. This ongoing negotiation of self-presentation, gender identity, and external pressures highlights the strategic management of identity, emphasizing how the pursuit of authenticity is shaped.

5.3 | Navigating Authenticity Amid Inclusivity Rhetoric

The third theme highlights the gap between the perceived inclusivity promoted by LGBTQ+ homestay platforms and the actual experiences of older hosts navigating these spaces. The data sheds light on the disparity between the stated commitment to inclusivity by these platforms and the real representation and accommodation of older hosts. While there is optimism surrounding platforms' claims of inclusivity across various axes,

including age, the perceived representation of younger men—especially in promotional materials featuring individuals in their 20 and 30s with muscular physiques—challenges these claims. As Participant 11 reflects,

I wasn't sure how I'd be received in my 60s, especially since they talk a lot about inclusivity across all axes, including age. I thought people would be welcomed regardless of their age, but I'm not convinced that is the case. The pages mainly feature men in their 20s and 30s with muscular physiques, and I don't feel I would be welcomed at the promoted events either.

Participants expressed the view that homestay platforms predominantly cater to younger individuals, capitalizing on the association of youth with vitality and sex appeal to drive business. Participant 2 offers an example of how platform practices are viewed as strategic decisions to leverage youthfulness, acknowledging its effectiveness in attracting guests:

Homestay platforms are for young people. Youth and vitality symbolize sex and sell. I'm not annoyed that businesses lean into this, but it's frustrating when they make tokenistic claims about welcoming everyone. As a host in my 60s, I've noticed younger guests overlook my listing, and I once overheard them dismiss older hosts as 'dubious.' If there are limits on who you're trying to appeal to, then just embrace that.

Likewise, Participant 8 draws attention to the nuanced relationship between branding, inclusivity, and perceived age-inclusivity within queer spaces. They acknowledge the positive aspect of branding something as queer, recognizing the inherent expectation of high standards of inclusivity that comes with it:

If you brand something as queer, you are held to high standards of inclusivity. I'm not criticizing this, but if the focus is on young people, that's acceptable. However, the muddled messaging can be harmful, as it leaves people feeling disrespected.

This acknowledgment reflects an understanding of the importance of creating safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals, where diversity is celebrated and respected. However, the participant expresses frustration with what they perceive as muddled messaging regarding age-inclusivity within queer spaces. This emphasizes the need to embrace inclusivity and offer affirmation to LGBTQ+ individuals across social contexts (Lyons et al. 2022).

While we cannot substantiate that platforms necessarily reproduce ageism, the preceding discussion adds complexity to the negotiation of identity, particularly regarding the tension between the desire for authenticity and pressures related to age, gender expression, and perceived attractiveness. For older hosts, these pressures often lead to self-regulation, where claims to authenticity are mediated by the need to align with the implicit norms of the platform. Within the context of age representation, older hosts grapple with the pressure to conform to youth-

centric standards of attractiveness, which may be influenced by the marketing practices of LGBTQ+ homestay platforms alongside broader societal norms (Ghumman and Ryan 2013; Opie and Phillips 2015). Their fear of being seen as less desirable or excluded due to age reflects internalized ageism, intersecting with internalized homophobia and the fear of rejection within LGBTQ+ spaces based on age and sexual orientation. Additionally, hosts may face pressure to conform to masculine norms to avoid stigma and discrimination. These pressures contribute to a misalignment between hosts' internal identities and the images they feel compelled to project, affecting their claims of authenticity. Furthermore, participants' frustration with perceived tokenistic inclusivity highlights the challenge of navigating authenticity in spaces where marketability seems to outweigh genuine representation, reflecting their struggle to find true acceptance and affirmation.

The following poignantly conveys the emotional toll of navigating authenticity in the face of ageism. By expressing uncertainty about how younger men perceive them, Participant 1 reveals a deep-seated concern about being viewed as a "creep," highlighting the fear of marginalization and stigma tied to their age:

Being gay and older does leave me feeling like younger gay men view me as a creep. I've no idea if they really do.

This highlights how perceived external judgments shape self-perception, as the participant navigates implicit norms favoring youth within LGBTQ+ spaces. Their reflection reveals an internal conflict driven by feelings of exclusion, complicating their ability to reconcile personal authenticity with societal expectations. The participant's experience illustrates how internalized insecurities and ageism intersect, fostering self-doubt and unease while amplifying the challenges of asserting an authentic self. These insights shed light on the challenges older LGBTQ+ individuals face as they grapple with the dual pressures of ageism and the prioritization of youth, offering a deeper understanding of the emotional and social dynamics involved in navigating claims to authenticity.

5.4 | Economic Necessity and the Shaping of Authenticity

The fourth theme explores how financial needs influence the ways older LGBTQ+ hosts present their identities on homestay platforms. The data reveals that the perceived necessity of income from these platforms provides insight into the intersection of economic need, age, and identity negotiation. For instance, Participant 6 illustrates this connection by discussing their financial situation and how hosting impacts their lifestyle. They explain,

I don't know if 'need' is the right word, but I wouldn't be unable to eat. Hosting allows me to have a life. My pension covers my basic needs, but that's about it. Without hosting, I wouldn't have money for much excitement, and that's the best way to put it.

This sentiment aligns with the economic realities faced by older individuals, particularly those who may rely on limited pensions of fixed income (Vickerstaff and van der Horst 2021). While the participant acknowledges that they would not “be unable to eat” without the income from hosting, they also emphasize the importance of additional funds for enhancing their quality of life, implying a desire for financial stability beyond mere survival.

The data provides insight into the intersection of identity presentation and the pressure older hosts face to conform to beauty standards and youthfulness norms to attract guests and secure bookings. Participant 9 highlights this by mentioning their experience with editing their profile picture to appear younger. They explain,

I’m laughing because I edited my profile picture to look younger. The money helps, and how I look definitely plays a role in bookings. You can have an amazing place, but I’ve had guests express hesitance simply because of my age. Even with great reviews, appearance can put people off, and there are many connotations associated with how you look.

While the exploration of profile pictures was unplanned, it serves to illustrate how authenticity claims are affected. The participant’s admission of editing their profile picture to appear younger reflects a calculated decision aimed at maximizing their attractiveness to potential guests. In this way, their claims to authenticity are affected by external pressures and considerations, rather than stemming from an intrinsic desire to express their true selves authentically. This demonstrates how external norms tied to age and appearance shape self-presentation, complicating the participants’ ability to claim authenticity on their terms. Consequently, their self-expression is influenced by perceived platform expectations that prioritize youth and beauty, reflecting a broader pattern of identity adjustment in response to external pressures. This phenomenon reveals a deep internal conflict, as hosts strive for genuine expression while contending with societal judgment, age-based discrimination, and the connotations of appearance shaped by ageist stereotypes. By conforming to expectations of youthfulness and attractiveness, the participant seeks to mitigate potential discrimination and increase their chances of success on, and thus income from, LGBTQ+ homestay platforms.

The data encapsulates participants’ apprehensions regarding femininity and the pressure to adhere to norms tied to appearance and identity to maximize bookings. Participant 4 expresses this concern, stating,

I was concerned that other pictures would make me seem too feminine. I’m fortunate to have a nice house, and I get a lot of bookings, but I wouldn’t have this success if I didn’t present myself in a more sanitized way. While some might say you just need to look professional, it’s more complicated than that. I feel I have to conform to a rigid standard of professionalism that doesn’t represent me or reflect my queer identity.

Participant 4’s concern about being seen as “too feminine” reflects the pressure to align with esthetic expectations that prioritize masculine traits associated with professionalism (Mizzi 2013). This reference to conforming to a standard of professionalism that is not visibly queer raises questions about the derogation of femininity.

Older hosts may feel compelled to distance themselves from femininity to align with marketable norms and avoid discrimination, reflecting a generational divide shaped by internalized ageist and heteronormative biases that devalue feminine expressions while prioritizing masculine presentation. The need to present a “sanitized” image to attract guests highlights the tension between claims of authenticity and platform expectations, as hosts strive to maintain a sense of authenticity while conforming to external pressures. This dynamic illustrates the complex interplay between identity negotiation, economic necessity, and platform-driven standards on LGBTQ+ homestay platforms. Rooted in the significance individuals attach to the income they generate from being a host, this interplay reveals a disconnect between perceived and experienced authenticity at the intersection of age, gender, and sexuality. Internalized gay ageism, situated within the complex and contested landscape of queer authenticity, intersects with economic need, which emerges as a key antecedent to affected authenticity. Together, these factors drive self-regulation, compelling hosts to adjust their self-presentation to align with external expectations.

6 | Denouement

Despite LGBTQ+ homestay platforms striving to foster environments where diverse identities are central, our study reveals that the emphasis on authenticity leads to varied claims of authenticity shaped by individuals’ self-regulation. These claims range from adopting understated, “everyday” aesthetics to projecting curated identities aligned with traditional norms of masculinity or, alternatively, resisting these pressures through more expressive styles. This regulation extends beyond societal norms to implicit platform expectations surrounding authenticity, serving as a way to navigate internalized gay ageism (Simpson 2015). Economic pressures amplify these challenges, with participants aligning their self-presentation with perceived market expectations—such as adapting to beauty norms or projecting marketable personas—to secure bookings. These dynamics unfold within the complex landscape of “queer culture,” where attributes such as youth, masculinity, and femininity are prioritized differently across relational settings. Such contexts highlight the multifaceted challenges of negotiating authenticity and the intersections of age, gender, and sexuality in shaping identity (Ozturk, Rumens, and Tatli 2020; Riach, Rumens, and Tyler 2014; West and Fenstermaker 1995). To conceptualize these processes, we introduce a dual framework of authenticity: affected authenticity, which reflects authenticity as a state, involving strategic adaptations to societal or marketplace expectations in specific contexts while potentially maintaining intrinsic authenticity elsewhere; and intrinsic authenticity, which represents authenticity as a trait, characterized by an enduring sense of self. This duality underscores

how LGBTQ+ individuals navigate pressures to conform while maintaining their authenticity in other domains. These findings reveal how external pressures and internal identity negotiations intersect, offering nuanced insights into the adaptive strategies marginalized individuals employ to balance authenticity with societal and economic demands.

Our dual framework of authenticity provides researchers with a valuable lens for examining the nuanced interplay between identity, agency, and external pressures. Building on Hewlin et al.'s (2020) observation of the uncertainties surrounding authenticity, affected authenticity raises critical questions about when, why, and how claims to authenticity are desirable and progressive. While individuals may assert authenticity as an act of agency, these assertions often involve complex negotiations where authenticity can both empower individuals and reinforce suppressive norms. This duality makes the framework particularly relevant for understanding identity construction in contexts shaped by societal, cultural, and economic forces. In the realm of platform work, for instance, affected authenticity sheds light on how individuals strategically adapt their self-presentation to align with expectations, especially when economic necessity compels them to conform to beauty or marketability norms. These adaptations reveal how claims to authenticity are deeply intertwined with broader structural pressures. Beyond the specific context of our study, this dual framework offers a broader lens for researchers examining identity processes at different intersections. By stripping it of its original context, this framework can be applied across diverse fields to explore how authenticity operates not as a fixed ideal but as a dynamic process that balances empowerment and constraint. This approach underscores the centrality of authenticity in navigating complex relational and structural dynamics, offering researchers a powerful means to interrogate identity negotiation in varied settings.

While this study provides valuable insights, it also highlights several areas for further exploration. Focusing on self-identified gay men aged 50 and above leaves unexamined the diversity of experiences across the broader LGBTQ+ spectrum, particularly how other identities navigate claims to authenticity. Expanding the concept of internalized gay ageism to encompass internalized queer ageism could better reflect these varied experiences. Although participants came from varied ethnic backgrounds, the analysis did not examine how ethnicity intersects with age, gender, and sexuality in shaping claims of authenticity. Cultural norms and discrimination tied to ethnicity may uniquely influence identity expression. The study's focus on LGBTQ+ homestay platforms also limits its scope. Extending research to settings such as LGBTQ+ bars, cafes, clubs, and travel firms could uncover diverse expressions of authenticity across organizational contexts. Such investigations might reveal how claims of authenticity are shaped not only by age, gender, and sexuality but also by cultural and social influences, offering a richer understanding of how LGBTQ+ individuals negotiate authenticity in varied environments.

In conclusion, this paper contributes to the growing literature on authenticity as a means to counter discrimination by examining the strategic ways individuals navigate identity (Bittner and Matos 2016). In our analysis, we illustrate how

claims to authenticity can simultaneously challenge and reinforce norms and expectations, leading us to propose the dual framework of affected and intrinsic authenticity. This duality offers a rich avenue for further exploration into how authenticity intersects with broader social, cultural, and political contexts. We look forward to future research that continues to unpack the complexities of identity intersections and authenticity, enriching this dynamic and evolving field of study.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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