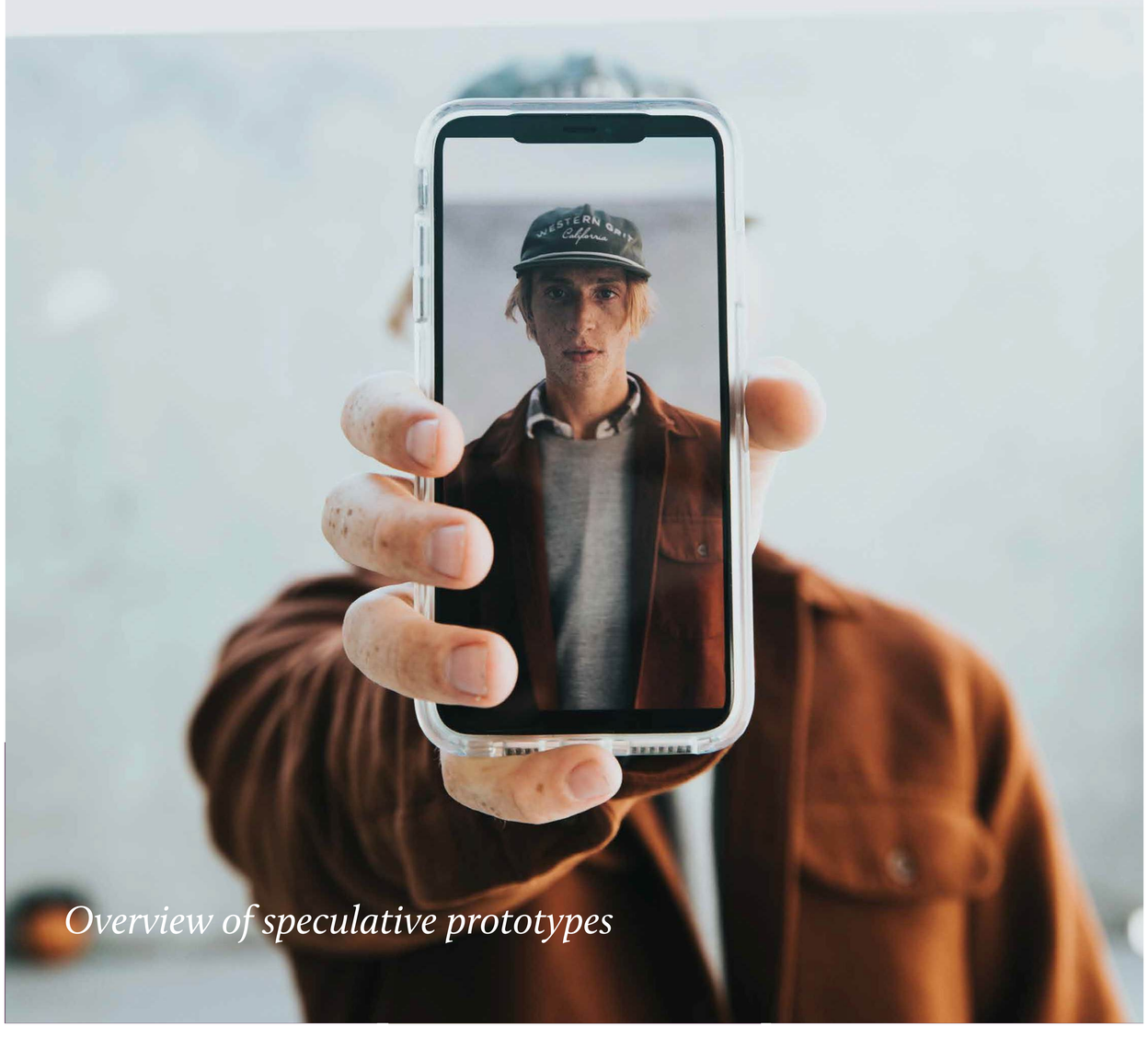
From research to design



Overview of speculative prototypes

The Rathenau Instituut is an independent knowledge institute that supports democratic decision-making on science, technology, and innovation. Through research and dialogues, we identify ethical and societal issues and stimulate political and public debate. We explore the impact of science and technology on people's lives, and focus on the governance of responsible research and innovation. We look into the impact of science and technology on people's lives, and we research the governance for responsible innovation in a democratic society.

In the project Inclusive online we explored how online apps and environments can be designed to be inclusive spaces where people can be free and safe. What potential do online spaces hold for connection and self expression? We collaborated with Dutch LGBTQI+ people, a group that is disproportionately affected by online harmful behavior and exclusion. Our research and design sessions resulted in prototypes of inclusive online environments. The full report with our findings and recommendations can be found on our website: www.rathenau.nl (in Dutch, summary available in English).

Find the full report at:

Rathenau.nl/nl/digitalisering/naar-een-nieuwe-verhouding-tot-technologiebedrijven/inclusief-online

Contact

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Rathenau Instituut idiotēs SIDNfonds

‘If Tech Fails to Design for the Most Vulnerable, It Fails Us All’ *~Afsaneh Rigot, 2022*

Overview of speculative prototypes

What would an online world look like where everyone feels free and safe?And why does it seem so hard to truly imagine such a world?

The choices designers make when building apps and platforms often feel self-evident, as if the internet is simply meant to work the way it does now. But that’s not the case. The way today’s online environments are structured tends to unconsciously exclude other ideas. Over time, people start believing that there are no real alternatives, and the system sustains itself.

But the internet can be different. To show that, we need imagination. That’s what speculative prototypes can offer: imaginative designs that aren’t meant to be ready-made solutions, but rather tools to help us picture something new. They show how online spaces could function, beyond the logic of how things are currently designed.

One prototype, for example, imagines being able to video call with a content moderator. This stands in stark contrast to the impersonal and large-scale way moderation is currently handled. But why do we accept it as normal that we can’t have personal contact with the companies that play such a powerful role in what we see and share online? These prototypes emerged during and after creative sessions with dozens of Dutch LGBTQI+ participants involved in our research. They are designed to spark public conversation about the future of the internet and the kind of digital world we want to live in.

Colofon

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Concept and Design: Ad Korf, Marieke van Dijk studio idiotēs

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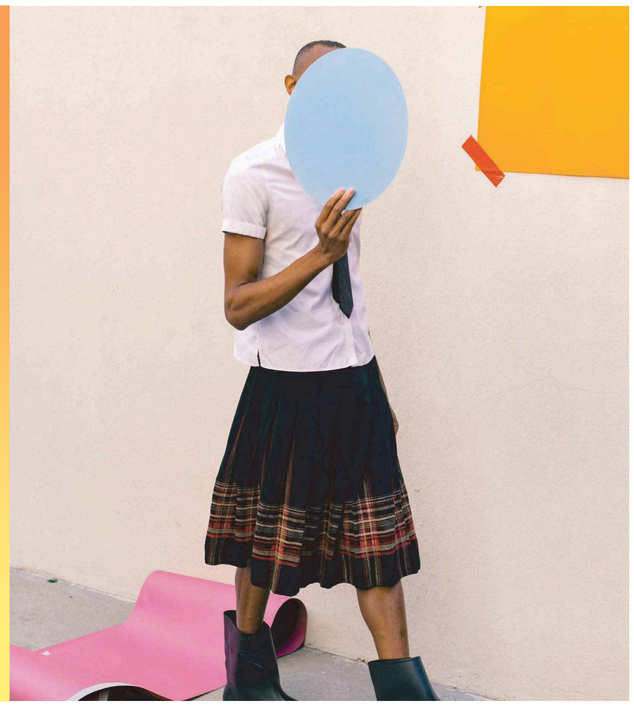
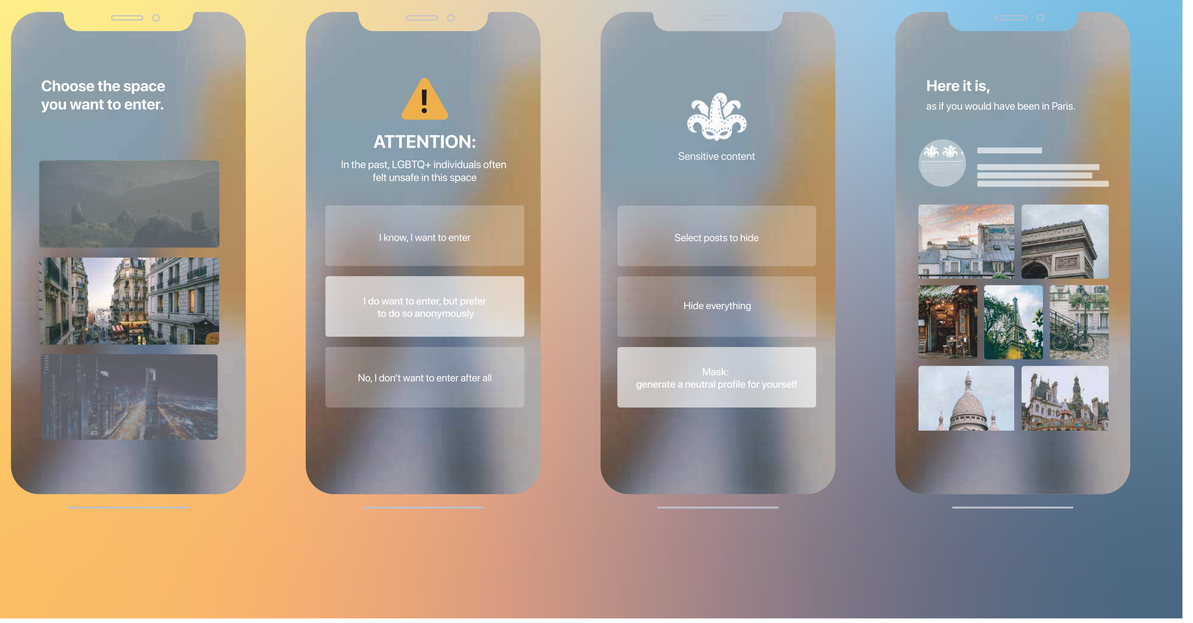
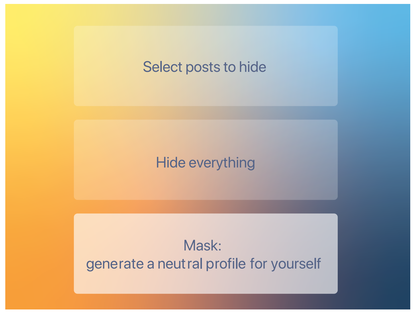
Robin

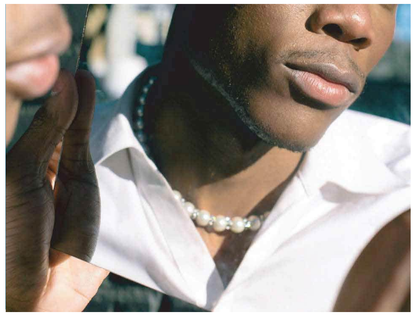
‘The value of roaming freely is immeasurable for discovering who you are.’

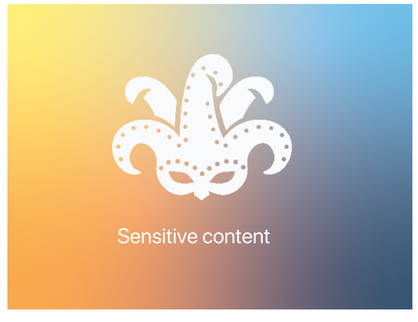




Opportunities for anonymity are essential for LGBTQ+ individuals, as safety isn’t always guaranteed when we express our authentic selves. People like Robin need protection in situations where expressing our identity could lead to serious negative consequences in the physical world.







Putting on a mask

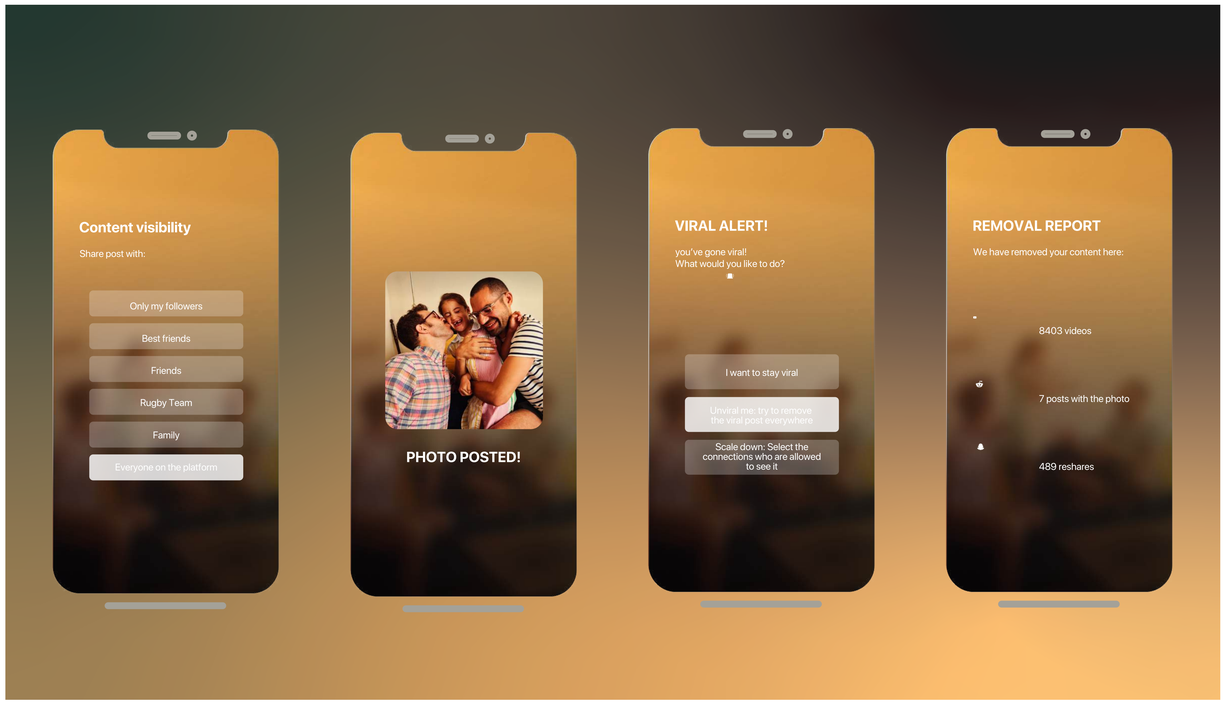
What if we reimagined digital spaces to prioritize safety, privacy, and the option for anonymity? The Putting on a mask prototype is designed with those values in mind. LGBTQ+ individuals often face barriers to expressing their identities freely online without fear of harm or judgment. Imagine a world where “digital masks” empower people to authentically engage across different communities without compromising their well-being.

The prototype allows users to temporarily enter a digital space with a mask on, so that their identity is protected from harm.

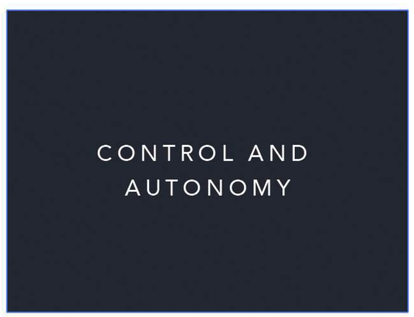
Anonymity and pseudonymity are vital tools in navigating online environments, offering vulnerable users the freedom to explore and express themselves authentically. By designing platforms that respect privacy from the outset, we can ensure that personal data is protected and that users have control over their online presence. This approach not only safeguards LGBTQ+ individuals from harm, but also creates opportunities for self-discovery and connection, enabling them to thrive in a digital world that values their well-being and autonomy.

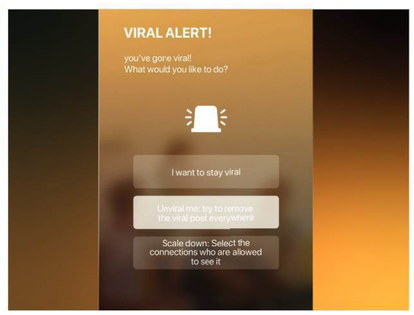
Benjamin & Youssef

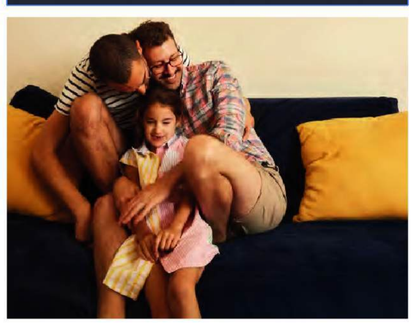
‘Imagine a digital space that answers to you, not the other way around.’

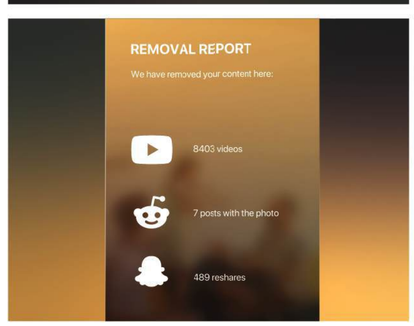


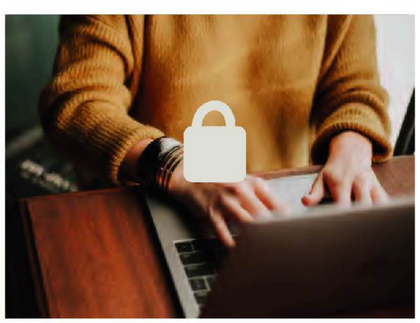
Going viral isn’t always a positive experience. People need control over how their story is shared online. Having the ability to decide what they see, how their content is shared across communities, and what others can see about them empowers individuals like Benjamin and Youssef to express themselves freely and authentically in online environments.











Control over sharing

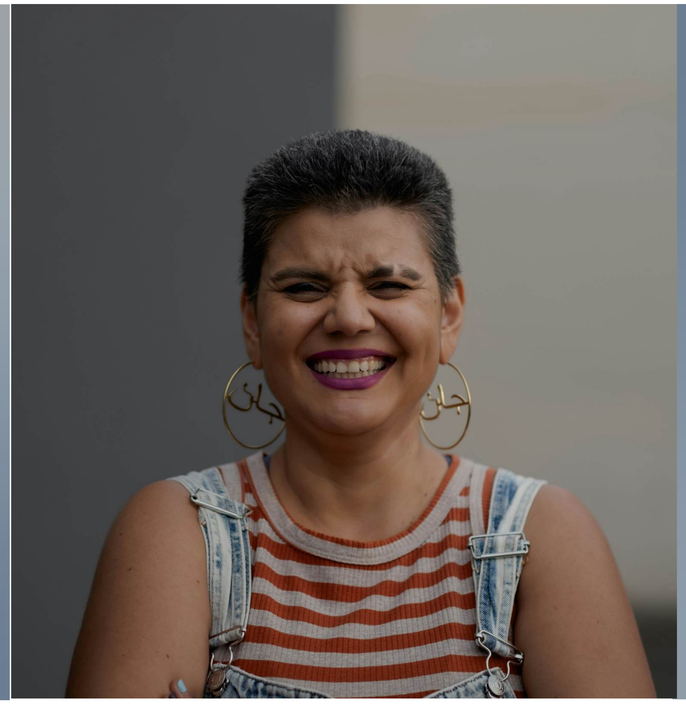
What if we can give people a sense of agency back? The Control over sharing prototype is diametrically opposed to how many contemporary online environments function in a number of ways. Instead of optimizing for maximum visibility, data collection, and engagement, this prototype focuses on autonomy, control, and contextual sensitivity. Users can receive a warning that their content has gone viral and they are given the option to take the post offline or make it invisible to specific groups.

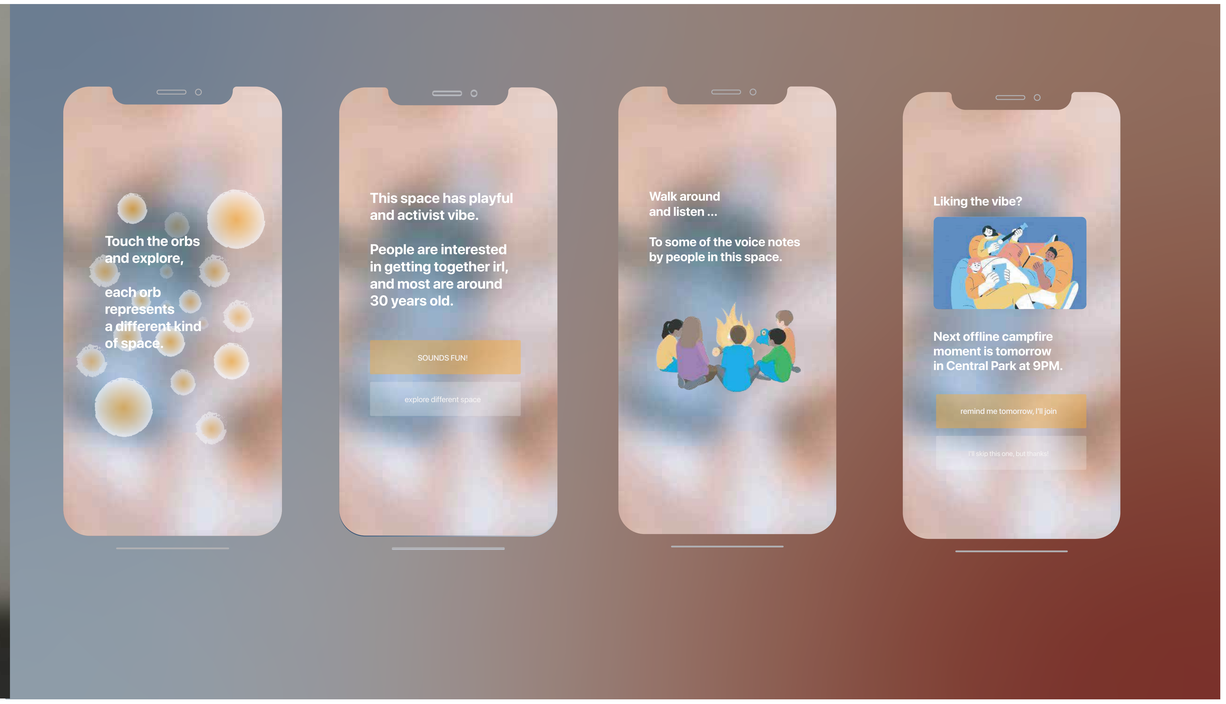
In this speculative prototype, they can also get help taking their content offline, even on platforms other than where they originally shared it.

The prototype allows users to decide who can see each post: for example, everyone on the platform, only followers, best friends, team members of the rugby team, family, or a combination of these. For example, LGBTIQ+ people can share aspects of their identity with selected groups, without the risk of being unintentionally outed.

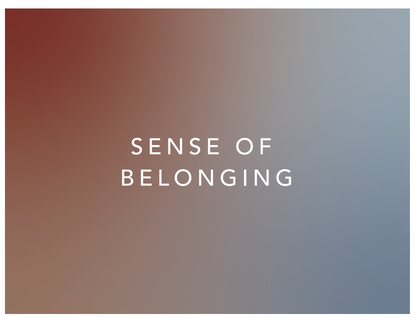
Fin

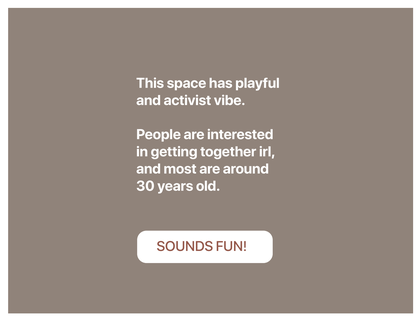
‘To feel at home and truly connect with others online, we need to belong, be seen, and be recognized as human.’

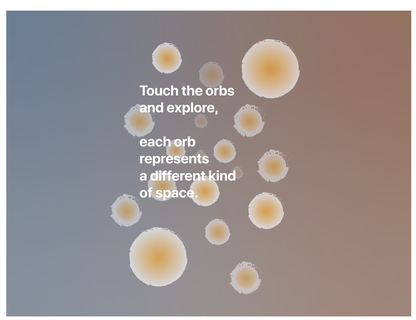




In order to realise a sense of belonging, first, a person must feel that their involvement in a group is valued by others. That they bring value to the group. Exploring online spaces can be daunting, so a little help might come in hand! Connecting online spaces with physical meetups, with safety in mind, can help people see that they are not alone.







Community orbs

How can online environments contribute to a sense of belonging? The Community orbs prototype is designed to help people connect with each other in online spaces.

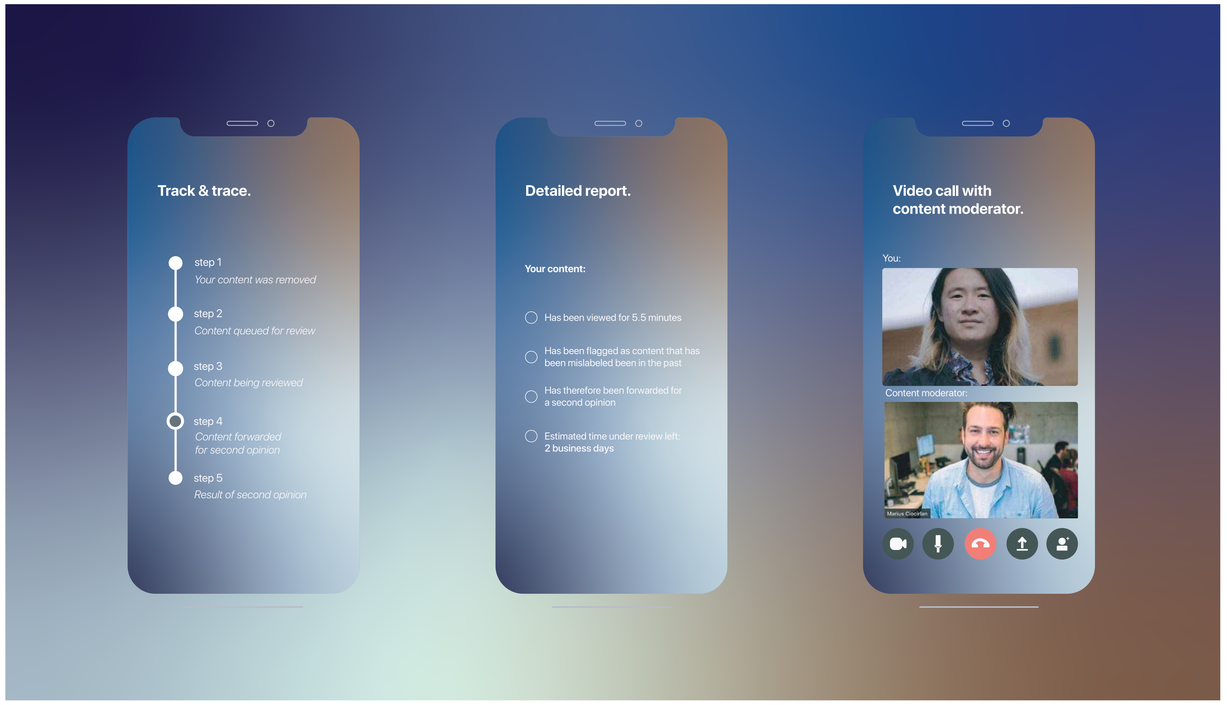
Can we think about what is needed for online spaces to invoke a sense of homecoming, getting in touch with like-minded people and building new futures together? How can the right to freedom of assembly and of association be fostered in these spaces?

The design of the prototype encourages you to slowly get to know an online space, dipping your toes in the water and looking around a bit to see if you like the vibe.

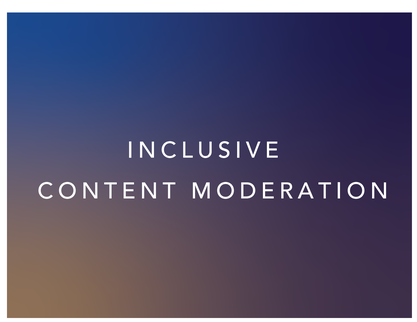
A connection is also made between physical and digital meetups.

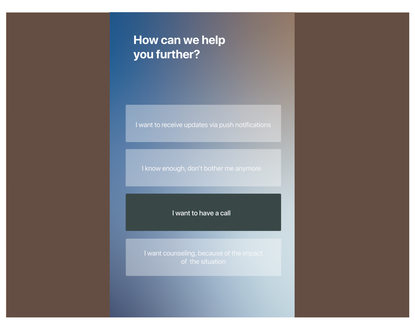
Noah

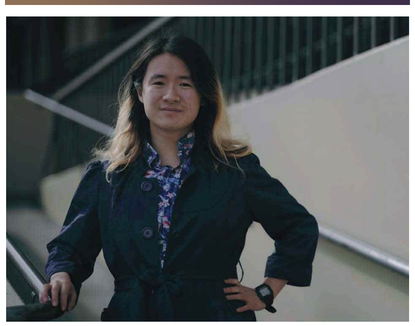
‘Inclusive content moderation takes my personal story seriously.’

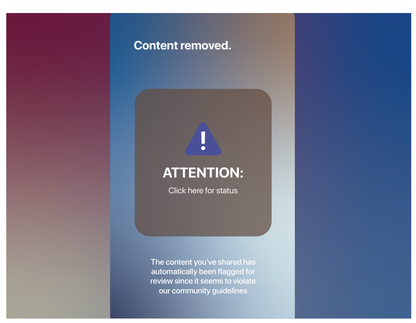


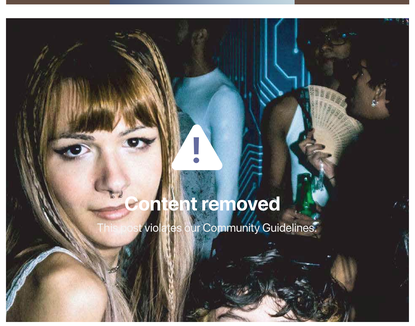
What if you could actually call with content moderators after your content has been removed from a platform. Inclusive rules, enough time and tools for moderators to enforce those rules, and approachable platforms that involve LGBTQ+ individuals in the moderation process are essential. This approach helps protect content, such as Noah's, from being incorrectly labeled as violating community guidelines.











Human in the loop

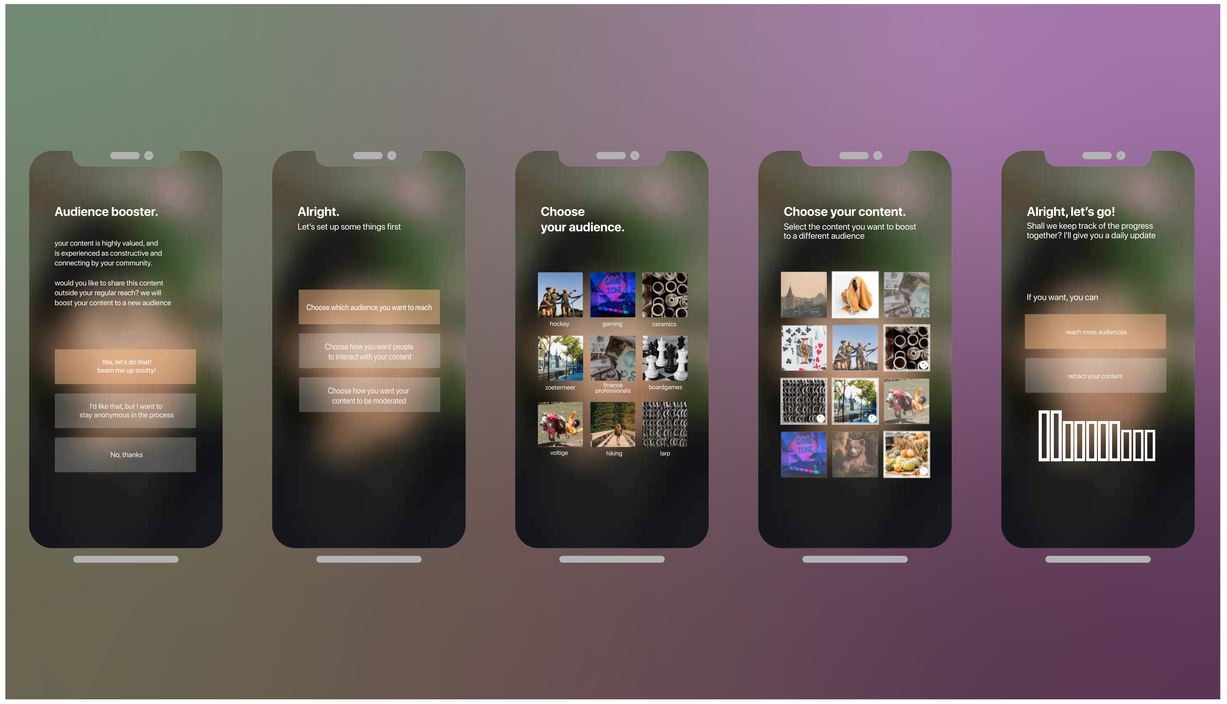
Can we imagine a world in which content moderation feels fair and humane? The Human in the loop speculative prototype is designed with a more human process in mind. The prototype provides users with transparency about the content moderation decision-making process.

It provides insight into why content has been moderated and offers the possibility to discuss this with a content moderator via a video call. In this way, it directly responds to the need for transparency around content moderation.

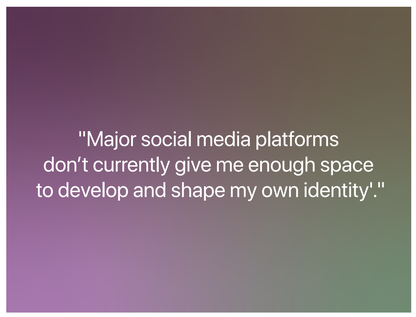
The prototype also exposes how normalized it is that content moderation is a process in which the content creator never comes into contact with the person who moderates. That while in smaller communities, moderators are often people from the community who enjoy a certain degree of trust. Within large-scale global online environments, offering video calling with moderators might not be a likely design choice, prompted by previous choices about scale and centralization. In doing so, the prototype exposes the relationship between the user experience and more upstream design choices.

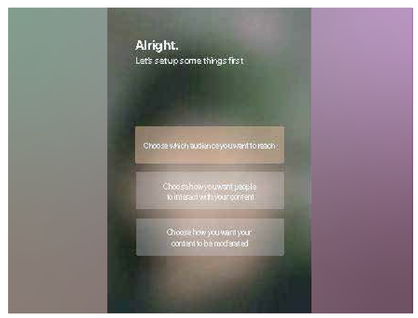
Tayla

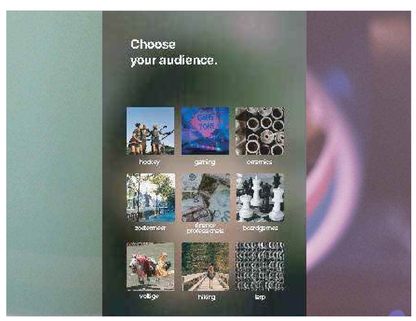
‘Expressing myself freely online takes courage.’

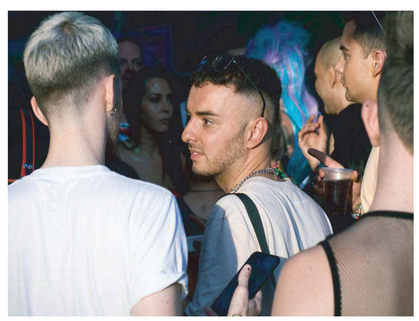


Online environments that support freedom of expression and create non-judgmental spaces are important for people to explore and express their identities. These environments allow users to contribute to public debate, share diverse perspectives, and learn from each other.









Audience booster

How can we redesign online spaces to prioritize self-expression and storytelling? The Audience booster prototype is designed to give people agency in how their voice is being shared.

Sometimes you may want your voice to reach new audiences and a diverse range of people, but you might be unsure on how to approach that. What if platforms guided you in the process of targeting your content to new audiences, in ways that normally only advertisers have access to?

The prototype gives you control over which content you would like to boost and updates you on how things are going. You always have the option to retract. If users had as much autonomy and control as advertisers do online, would online spaces feel different?