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Gay on Instagay: A Critical Examination of the Instagram Safe Space used by Male Gay Communities through Portraiture Photography and Gay Iconography Analysis

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**James Richards.**

**Gay on Instagay**

A Critical Examination of the Instagram Safe Space used by  
Male Gay Communities through Portraiture Photography and  
Gay Iconography Analysis

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## Abstract

The growth of social media has created a new form of online phenomenon within gay culture: the Instagays, gay men who have thousands of followers on Instagram. These Instagay accounts form a new community space for gay men, incorporating fans, followers, commentators and spectators. It is widely agreed within the gay and academic communities that the online space can function as a safe space for gay men, with comparable benefits to physical spaces such as gay bars. However, are such spaces entirely safe? What are the potential “unsafe complexities” of such a space, especially when saturated with highly sexualised selfies? Through the practice of portraiture photography within the homes of Instagays, and through critical visual analysis of Instagays’ online aesthetics within the context of gay iconography, this research critically examines the limits and complexities of gay men’s online safe spaces. As a result, the research discovers that the highly sexualised body continues to function as a commodity within online gay communities, while Instagays use their bodies to gain attention, which may not be entirely beneficial to their own wellbeing or that of their followers. Additionally, the research discusses the virtual safe space before confirming that similar to a physical safe space, the new Instagram space is not free from politics, prejudice and struggles between the desire to have an idealised body and the mortal reality.

**Key words:** Instagram, Instagay, gay, safe space, portraiture, gay iconography.

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**Figure 1:** *@ethan\_johnson* (James Richards, 2019).



**Figure 2:** *@alschiavo* (James Richards, 2020).



**Figure 3:** *@jacobjosephleech* (James Richards, 2020).



**Figure 4:** *@jmemrgn* (James Richards, 2020).

## Introduction

Instagays are exactly who you think they are: sexy, gay men who flaunt their bodies on Instagram and rack up thousands and thousands of likes. Users have hashtagged #instagay on the platform in more than 34 million posts (though this doesn't encompass all such posts). (Oliver, 2019)

The study of social media is becoming increasingly essential when exploring the importance of how the LGBTQ+ community (specifically gay men) use online spaces to explore self-representation, sexual identity, community and visibility within heteronormative society. Prior research has been undertaken by scholars David Shaw (1997), John Campbell (2004), Sharif Mowlabocus (2016) and Elija Cassidy (2020) who examine the relationship between gay men and how they navigate and interact within digital spaces (chatrooms, social media etc.). This study endeavours to explore and understand the following questions: What are the “unsafe” complexities of the Instagram space for gay men? How can the practice of photographic portraiture contribute to the investigation surrounding the complexities of Instagram as a safe space for gay men? And finally, what are the politics behind Instagay visual culture, if such culture is placed within the traditions and conventions of gay iconography and photography? The study is conducted by a gay researcher and photographer embedded into the growing Instagay phenomenon via Instagram. It examines gay iconography and the potential for photographic portraiture to act as a safe pictorial space. This is investigated by taking portraits of Instagays within their home setting, attempting to capture an alternative, and potentially more genuine, representation of each, away from their social media following.

In Chapter One the study examines past and present forms of safe spaces within gay subculture, exploring the necessity of physical spaces. However, these community spaces are not exclusively safe from invasion, with journalist Amber Jamieson (2017) reporting on the mass shooting at gay nightclub Pulse in Orlando, Florida, on June 12, 2016, where fifty-three people were injured and forty-nine killed. The continuous invasion and violation of LGBTQ+ spaces identifies that the safety these spaces provide is questionable. Matt Lambert's collaborative project with the gay dating application Grindr, called *Home* (Lambert, 2017), was made in response to the Pulse shooting (Bondi de Antoni, 2016) to raise awareness of the importance of safe spaces for the gay

community as spaces of escapism and self-expression. Understanding a safe space and the importance it represents for individuals can only be experienced by marginalised communities within society, confirming the necessity of spaces for escapism away from reality. Supported by studies conducted by academics Howard Hughes (2002) and Nina Held (2007), a safe space, as well as its value, comes from individuals seeking kinship and community from others needing the same safety away from potential prejudice. Repeated violation of physical gay spaces as refuges for escapism (Hanhardt, 2016) has meant that physical spaces have become less secure, and thus, gay communities have begun seeking alternative spaces with more safety such as online (Lucero, 2017). Thus, spaces of social interaction for gay communities can fluctuate between the physical (gay nightclubs etc.) and the digital (social media etc.) depending on the necessity (Mowlabocus, 2016; Cassidy, 2020).

Instagram is examined in Chapter One as a social media platform, communication tool and research method while evidencing the safety aspects it offers users with analysis provided by authors Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield and Crystal Abidin (2020). Individuals are more connected due to social media, thanks to the accessibility of platforms like Instagram, which was the fourth most downloaded mobile application of 2020 (Koetsier, 2021), with over one billion active users (Dhillon, 2018) and an average screen time of fifty-three minutes a day per user (Molla and Wagner, 2018). A pattern emerges on Instagram when hashtags are introduced on posts such as #gay and #instagay (Cassidy, 2020), acting as introductions to social media profiles that use considered visual language surrounding gay representation and the male body, consisting predominantly of selfies and shirtless mirror selfies to name a few examples. These are the online spaces of Instagays, a subculture within the online gay communities of Instagram that are, as journalist David Oliver (2019) describes, gay men who exhibit their idealised physiques on social media for validation in the form of follows, comments and likes. Social media has many stereotypical assumptions that are predominantly negative; as Oliver (2019) cites, there have been rising numbers of mental health cases within gay communities as a direct result of Instagay accounts. Although Instagram is presented as a community safe space online (Leaver et al., 2020), the ways Instagays are choosing to present themselves – using the body as a commodity to cement social importance within the community hierarchy online – is potentially harmful (Mowlabocus, 2016).

Chapter Two, Methods and Processes, is comprised of two subchapters, the first being Portraiture which critically examines the methods employed within this research and discusses the insights generated from such practices and their reflections. The study firstly explores connections between portraiture paintings and photographic portraiture that appropriated the visual language during the formative years of the medium (Bate, 2016). Visual case studies discussed will be *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Johannes Vermeer (c.1665), the Daguerreian portrait which gained popularity during the nineteenth century (Clarke, 1997) and contemporary portraiture photographer Richard Learoyd. Examples are discussed within the chapter to explore the performative nature of photographic portraiture and potential visual bias of the photographer or artist over a sitter's likeness. The practice of photographic portraiture and its potential contribution to the investigation aims to explore the ideology and assumptions of capturing an accurate representation of a sitter's "inner self" (Clarke, 1997, p. 101), with assumptions that a photograph of an individual in an unguarded and private setting allows the potential to capture an accurate likeness on camera. However, Sean Tucker (2016) explains the difficulty for a portrait photographer to capture authenticity within an idealistic world, as many individuals walk around with prepared personas for social interaction. The performative nature of photographic portraiture and how it was used as an experimental visual method within the study is examined by attempting to photograph a potentially more genuine depiction of Instagays within their homes. This offered them a potential safe pictorial space and an alternative form of representation away from their eroticised Instagram performance and online followers.

The second method examined within Chapter Two is personal communication undertaken during the portraiture sessions within the homes of each Instagay. Urban researcher and academic Andrew Gorman-Murray (2007) states that the privacy and control the home offers allows individuals to determine the level of access it affords outsiders. However, once the threshold is crossed by a foreign invader (the photographer and the camera), the meaning of the space is subverted from a private space to one of observation and interaction. Photographic portraiture contributes further to the investigation surrounding the complexities of Instagram as a safe space for gay men. The study explores this first-hand through the aforementioned photographic encounters and personal communication within the respective homes of Instagay participants: Ethan Johnson, Anthony Schiavo, Jacob Leech and Jamie Morgan (see figures 1–4). Following the process of

photographing the participants, the sociological theory of Erving Goffman's Frontstage/Backstage (1956/1990) is examined to discuss the performative nature of social interaction through both photographic portraiture and social media in tandem. Social performances can be undertaken for a present or assumed audience, one another and even oneself, as some individuals become so engulfed by their own performance they become convinced the persona created for the sake of others is an accurate representation of self (Goffman, 1956/1990). This means a performance portraying genuineness, without being genuine, can be achieved within portraiture, with the sitter potentially tricking the viewer, photographer and potentially themselves with the strength of their performance. Goffman's Frontstage/Backstage theory (1956/1990) will be challenged through criticism from author Bruce Wilshire (1982) who, through his own exploration, questions its legitimacy within sociology. Chapter two provides a critical reflection of the two methods used. The research aims to understand and critically examine pre-existing assumptions of photographic portraiture, the home and social media as spaces.

Chapter Three examines historic iconography surrounding the male body and gay representation, and investigates the politics behind Instagay visual culture if such culture is placed within the traditions and conventions of photography. The parallels between the iconography of ancient Greek sculptures depicting idealised male representation (Asen 1998), gay pornography (Mercer, 2003; Mowlabocus, 2016), and case studies of photographic work by gay photographers Minor White and Robert Mapplethorpe to contextualise the iconography surrounding the male body and its use as an erotic object for gay viewers are explored. The historic iconography surrounding the male body, its influence on gay representation within pornography (Mercer, 2003; Mowlabocus, 2016) and the homoeroticism of the male body within photography are examined. This is then compared to the imagery posted by Instagays online, with examination of how some gay men online have copied the homoerotic iconography of the male body by applying this visual language to their online aesthetic for a mass audience of assumed gay men via Instagram. Instagays, due to the homoerotic and sexualised nature of their imagery, share links to the work of photographers such as Robert Mapplethorpe, who photographed the male body for an assumed male audience as erotic objects (Clarke, 1997). This gay iconography allows Instagays to be idolised online within gay communities based on physical appearance. Thus, fascination surrounding Instagay accounts,

and the men that curate these online profiles of idealised male beauty, is rooted in historic representation and iconography surrounding the idolised and idealised male body (Mercer, 2003).

Also within Chapter Three, contributions from previous studies and findings by academics Lynne Hillier, Chyloe Kurdas and Philomena Horsley (2001), Campbell (2004), Mowlabocus (2016), Leanna Lucero (2017) and Cassidy (2020) are used to investigate the potential of online spaces for gay communities and examine the ways gay men interact online to meet other gay men both virtually and physically. Studies conducted by the aforementioned cite the importance of the online space and how it is “significant in the lives of young gay men” (Cassidy, 2020, p. 8). Online spaces are used as social tools to enable the exploration of LGBTQ+ identity safely, affording security to experiment with sexual identity (Lucero, 2017). This is not often done within mass media, which generally focuses on depictions of heteronormative ideals; therefore, Instagay accounts and online spaces made by gay men with the intention of being viewed, interacted and consumed by other gay men are essential for representation by using gay iconography and homoerotic imagery which appeal to an exclusively gay audience. Instagay accounts act as a network of community contacts by using hashtags such as #gay, #instagay, #gayboy, #gayguy, which allow an individual to connect to millions of gay men within a relatively safe space (Cain, 2015). However, are online spaces, as identified by Campbell (2004), Mowlabocus (2016) and Cassidy (2020), as safe for gay communities as they first appear?

Therefore, the study aims to examine the use of and necessity for safe spaces within gay communities, exploring possible spaces such as gay nightclubs, the home, photographic portraiture and social media. It discusses the possibility that online spaces like Instagram have become innovators for self-representation on a mass visual scale (Leaver et al., 2020) and are therefore creating potential for safe spaces to move from the physical to the digital. The study also simultaneously examines how gay men have found and use the visual-based social media platform of Instagram for gay and self-representation (selfies), often surrounding depictions of the male body (shirtless selfie). By using photographic portraiture and personal interaction, this study attempts to explore the limitations and complexities of Instagram as a safe space for gay men. One example of the present complexities is the potential harm it may generate for viewers as the focus online has become a metropolitan gay hierarchy (Sinfield, 1998) of idolised users. Therefore, this

thesis examines the historic representations of the male body and how this visual language has influenced gay representation and become the norm online within gay subculture specifically.

The idealised or idolised body is not something that is exclusive to gay subculture. It is visually present within all areas of society, both modern and historically (Ewing, 2000). However, within this study, the focus is exclusively on the idealised male body and gay iconography favoured and present online within the Instagay phenomenon. Author William Ewing (2000) identifies the idealised or idolised body as being a visual representation of “perfection” and references models and celebrities as modern-day versions of idol worship: “These are the true idols of our age, representing beauty, vitality, health, youth, even freedom” (p. 272). Cultural and community worship of the idealised and idolised standards of beauty and perfection, which is seen as visually superior (models, celebrities etc.), is one that can incite obsession and anxieties within a viewer regarding their own physical appearance (Ewing, 2000). Therefore, taking into account these complexities of the Instagram space for gay men, how safe is Instagram? How can the practice of photographic portraiture contribute to the investigation? And what are the politics behind Instagay visual culture, if such culture is placed within the traditions and conventions of gay iconography and photography? Like physical safe spaces, online spaces are potentially not free from social politics, prejudice, narcissism and struggles surrounding the desire to have an ideal body versus the mortal reality.

## 1. Safe Spaces

### 1.1 Examples and Necessity for Safe Spaces

Examples of safe spaces **are** shared throughout this chapter of study to illustrate the social value and community importance that physical and digital spaces afford gay communities. However, the use of safe spaces is not exclusively limited to gay communities, **as** various marginalised communities rely on the presence of such spaces and the security they offer. Author Moira Kenney (2001) states **that** the use of “safe space” as a recognised term first gained meaning with the women’s rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The meaning of the phrase was used to form a space and politically minded community to distance themselves from male-dominated patriarchy: “Safe space, in the women’s movement, was a means rather than an end and not only a physical space but also a space created by the coming together of women searching for community” (Kenney, 2001, p. 24). A safe space, as well as the community within, is not without its internal disagreements; however, this unification and sense of togetherness created within the spaces away from outsiders was a result of the devotion and dedication to a common project for change, be it societal or politically driven (Harris, 2015). Many communities that did not fit the societal norm of the era made their own safe spaces so they could be a more authentic version of self, away from outsiders’ prejudice:

It’s the same basic idea for other groups, like women and people of colour, who tend to be less well-represented or well-respected by society at large. People whose voices are quite literally heard less than those of white men, since white men still tend to dominate conversations in media, classrooms, boardrooms, politics, and everyday life. (Crockett, 2016)

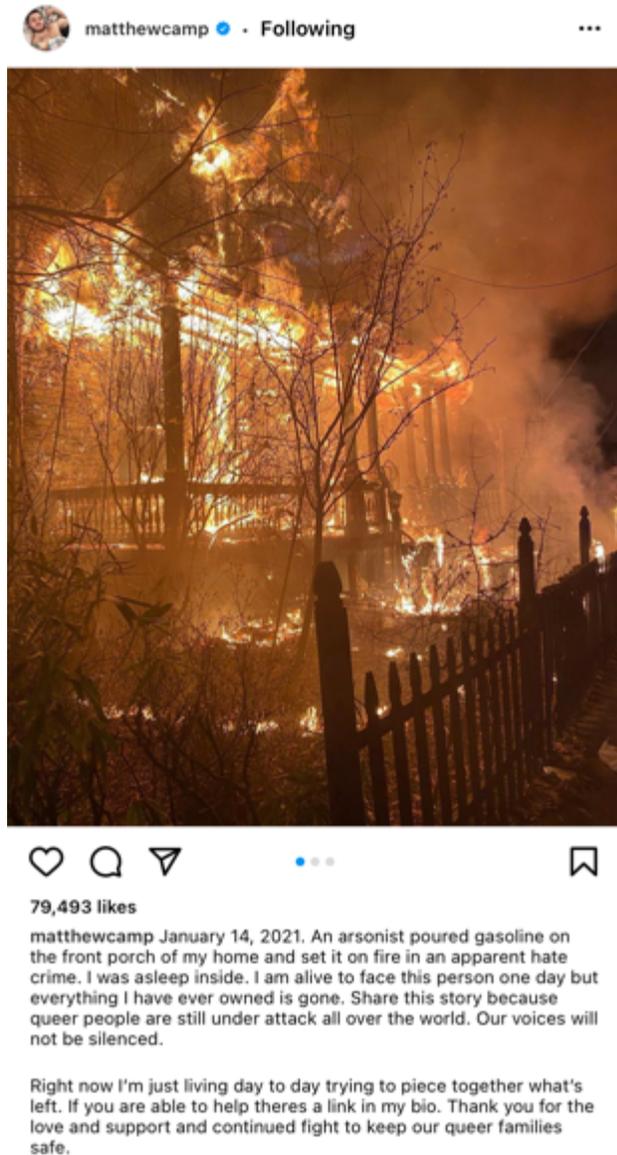
The home often holds stereotypical ideals of security as a space **for individuals to** create feelings of safety from outside surveillance, explaining the essential role home plays in the safe exploration and assertion of gay men’s sexual identities (Gorman-Murray, 2006). Home allows individuals to control the level of access and surveillance for others within the space, therefore creating a secure space for identity exploration free from outside judgement (Gorman-Murray, 2007). Many same-sex couples shun public displays of affection; thus, home is the space **where** they can be

affectionate without fear or judgement, further strengthening connotations of safety **that** the home represents for gay men (Gorman-Murray, 2007). This **shows that** gay men still do not feel fully safe in daily society due to potential homophobia and hate crime. Journalist Sam Francis (2020) explains that in 2018–2019 there were 14,491 recorded cases of hate crime in the UK, marking a 160% increase from the 2014–2015 recorded figures of 5,591. Thus, home is an important space for gay men as it **creates** feelings of intimacy, self-expression, privacy and security which are normative meanings of home for all individuals (Gorman-Murray, 2007).

Gay men's homes were used in non-heteronormative ways, employed for house-parties which opened up the 'private' space of the home for 'public' use, bringing in non-normative bodies, discourses and activities. But these parties crucially fostered both individual gay identities and the wider subculture. (Gorman-Murray, 2006, p. 62)

Home and the feelings of privacy it offers gay men **are essential**, as gay representation in public spaces can often be impeded by the pressures of heteronormative society stopping gay men from performing their identities publicly and appearing more heterosexual (playing straight) to avoid potential public discrimination (Gorman-Murray, 2007). Gay bars are considered safe spaces of gay expression within the community by many due to the "homelike" atmosphere they encapsulate (Gorman-Murray, 2006). They provide a social space to openly and safely explore behaviours and desires publicly, operating as spaces for individuals to confirm their gay social identity (Gorman-Murray, 2006). This link to the "homelike" spaces showcases parallels between the home environment and that of public gay spaces. Home, despite its association and characteristics of safety, is not exempt from violation. In 2021 an arson-based hate crime was committed against gay porn actor Matthew Camp (see figure 5), in which his home was set ablaze with him asleep inside, showcasing that even the home is no longer safe from physical intrusion. Therefore, gay men seek locations and spaces that offer and encourage the safety and camaraderie of the gay community, both in the context of a holiday environment and the home setting (Hughes, 2002).

Examples of these spaces are gay clubs and bars where gay men can gather to socialise and interact away from the heteronormative expectations of society. Academic Nina Held (2014) surmised that feeling **secure** within gay leisure spaces, such as Manchester's Gay Village, is an **important** factor



**Figure 5:** *January 14, 2021* (Matthew Camp, 2021).

when examining the comfort these spaces provide for the community. “It helps create and validate the individual

identities of gay men” (Hughes,

2002, p. 154). Spaces such as gay clubs and bars provide support and a social network within the community for self-expression while providing a social environment which encourages the empowerment of sexual identity safely surrounded by peers (Hughes, 2002). However, gay spaces such as Manchester’s Gay Village have increasingly become popular tourist spots, not only for gay communities but also for the heterosexual community (specifically heterosexual women), peeping in on gay culture and invading the spaces (Held, 2014). **That said,**

**gay men are still the predominant group to**

**frequent Manchester’s Gay Village, using the space as escapism from heteronormative expectations (Hughes, 2002).** This explains the space’s potential appeal to heterosexual women

who, similarly to gay men, use the space to escape the oppression of heterosexual, male-dominated society (Held, 2014). As these gay spaces are typically void of heterosexual men, heterosexual women can relax away from the male gaze (Held, 2014). “So, for straight women the gay space offers a space away from the demands of heterosexuality, specifically men and hetero-masculine performances” (Skeggs, 1999, p. 225). Gay men seek refuge within community and gay spaces from the hetero-masculine oppression perpetuated within everyday society; heterosexual women in some instances similarly seek refuge from the same social oppression and therefore borrow the

safety and security of physical gay spaces like gay clubs for their own liberation and escapism (Skeggs, 1999).

Despite the significance of safe spaces for marginalised communities, these physical spaces, as previously discussed, are consistently invaded by outsiders, detracting from the safety and security these physical spaces were created for: “No space can ever be 100 percent safe — but this is much more true for some groups of people than others” (Crockett, 2016). On June 12, 2016, forty-nine people lost their lives, with fifty-three recorded injured, during a mass shooting that occurred at the gay nightclub Pulse in Orlando,



**Figure 6:** A makeshift memorial outside the Pulse nightclub, a month after the mass shooting in Orlando, Florida, last year (John Raoux, 2016).

Florida in the United States of America (Jamieson, 2017). Human rights activists, academics and the media used the attack to depict the importance of spaces such as gay nightclubs within the LGBTQ+ community and their functionality as refuges from the scrutiny and potential hostility of everyday life the community experience (Hanhardt, 2016), confirming that physical safe spaces can offer a feeling of safety for a community. Thus, spaces such as gay clubs provide safety for sexual identity *when* respected (Hanhardt, 2016). “For LGBTQ people, survival is work, it is love, it is hard, it is a risk. It is defiance in a world where some would have us disappear” (Abad-Santos, 2016).

Journalist Naveen Kumar (2020) explains that LGBTQ+ communities are one of the highest-risk groups for depression and anxiety, with scientific research conducted in the 1990s exposing that



Figure 7: “Gay plague agony” (The News of the World, c.1980s).

the root cause for poor mental health within the community derived from social discrimination from mass media. For example, see newspaper headlines during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s (see figure 7). During the height of the AIDS pandemic, gay men were vilified within mass media, with the condition even being dubbed as the “Gay Plague” (Braidwood, 2018). The effects of the stigma and homophobia **incited** by the media for public consumption during the AIDS crisis **have** only recently been addressed. In 2018, *The New York Times* publicly apologised on World AIDS Day for its “shameful” media coverage of the HIV and AIDS crisis in the 1980s (Duffy, 2018). These historical events can therefore potentially explain why younger generations of gay men do not feel accepted within mainstream society, due to ingrained social opinions and mass media portrayals and vilification of gay communities during the AIDS pandemic.

For individuals existing within marginalised communities, such as gay communities, the relationship between physical safety and psychological safety are often delicately intertwined (Crockett, 2016). This is where the necessity and ideology of safe spaces is rooted and furthermore demonstrates why their existence is essential for many (Crockett, 2016). Many communities associate a physical space with safety due to it representing a psychological safety; thus, they feel secure within the space to socialise with the community that frequent said space:

The feeling of safety in a gay bar and actual safety are two different things. Though they are connected, there’s no such thing as a safe space for LGBTQ people. LGBTQ people know this better than anyone. We live it, and our history is marred by it. (Abad-Santos, 2016)

From conversations conducted first-hand with participants (see figures 1-4) for this research, they all agreed the gay community have spaces that are safer for them as a community but are never fully secure to the same degree as their heterosexual counterparts. The attack in Orlando **sparked**

headlines, news stories and fear that even in the twenty-first century, one can still be targeted simply due to one's sexual orientation (Jamieson, 2017). Therefore, as physical safe spaces designed out of necessity for gay communities are not as safe as assumed, alternative spaces have surfaced online that offer differing forms of safety **that are** distanced from physical spaces and face-to-face interaction. The following section briefly examines the relationship gay communities have had with online spaces (some exclusively gay) since the inception of the internet. However, is the online alternative as safe as **it** first appears, or do online spaces like Instagram and Facebook come with their own share of dangers surrounding visuals of self-representation?

### 1.2 Gay Spaces Online

When terms online or digital space are used within the study, it is referencing either a website or social media application that facilitates the gathering of individuals and communities virtually for online interaction. Gay men's online spaces hold great importance for gay communities and offer alternative spaces away from the physical (Cassidy, 2020). Online spaces are used by gay men to find other likeminded men for a range of reasons such as friendships, relationships, dating and facilitating one-off sexual encounters (Mowlabocus, 2016). Online spaces can be used by gay communities as a rehearsal space for coming out to other individuals and to **gauge** potential responses before committing to the real-life act of coming out (Hillier et al., 2001, p. 2). **The importance of online spaces for gay men is evidenced by several exclusively gay sites like Gaydar and its more modern successor Grindr (Cassidy, 2020).** However, there are sites that, although not exclusively gay, have become spaces for gay men to meet and interact, such as Instagram and Facebook, which facilitate gay men finding one another **online** without any prior communication necessary. Thanks to the invisible audiences of social media, an individual may gain a new social network of contacts and potential friends (Lucero, 2017). Social media is changing and challenging ideas about LGBTQ+ identities and safe spaces online but the necessity of these platforms has not yet been fully explored (Lucero, 2017).

Since the formative years of internet interaction, it has been documented both culturally and academically that online spaces made and created by LGBTQ+ communities are a fundamental necessity in the daily lives of young gay men (Cassidy, 2020). The ways gay men interact with online spaces since the birth of the internet **are** documented in the findings of scholars Shaw

(1997), Campbell (2004), Mowlabocus (2016) and Cassidy (2020) who have all researched and discussed the topic. Academic research into the use of online media has increased steadily in recent years; however, Shaw (1997) was arguably the first academic to exclusively research gay men and their use of new digital spaces (Mowlabocus, 2016). Within his study, Shaw (1997) identifies a symbiotic relationship between the online and offline lives of gay men and surmises that even during the formative stages of internet development, gay men were proficient at using digital spaces to meet other gay men both virtually and physically, thus challenging previous academic understanding and discoveries regarding the relationships between physical and online spaces and the communities that use them (Mowlabocus, 2016).

In other words, from the very beginning, at least some of the work on gay men's digital culture has recognised the fact that the digital is not separate from other spheres of gay life, but in fact grows out of, while remaining rooted in, local, national and international gay male subculture. (Mowlabocus, 2016, p. 7)

As identified by Mowlabocus (2016), further research was needed as the previous findings of “disembodiment thesis” (Campbell, 2004, p. 10) did not accurately represent how gay men used digital spaces or how online interactions cross over into their offline encounters. When discussing the escapism and disembodiment conclusions present within academic research into cyberspace during the formative years of internet study (Rheingold, 1994; Jones, 1995; Turkle, 1995), it must be considered that the body is more than a physical object and it also resembles social significance (Campbell, 2004). Following the discovery of Shaw (1997), Campbell (2004) explores how the online space is appealing to gay men and the ways gay subculture use the body within a digital context, not only for erotic exploration and community, but also as an alternative means of discussing and viewing the body outside the physical (Mowlabocus, 2016). One such subculture present within online gay subculture is the metropolitan gay model which has become dominant in Westernised society:

This ‘metropolitan model’ encapsulated the dominant expression of male homosexuality in the west at the end of the 20th century (an expression which continues to dominate global gay male subculture at the time of writing this). The metropolitan model suggests a

particular geographical preference (large cities and urban conurbations), a particular lifestyle (imbued with the rhetoric of compulsory consumption and late capitalism) and an (over)investment in forms of (white, middle-class, Eurocentric) masculinity. (Mowlabocus, 2016, p. 24)

The metropolitan gay model (Sinfield, 1998), as explained by Mowlabocus (2016) and Campbell (2004), is a gay subculture that draws visual references from media that portray the stereotype of the male ideal in Western society, such as gay pornography, films and now digital spaces. “The idealised image of the erotic male body” (Campbell, 2004, p. 161) found within gay subculture reinforces the social hierarchies and confirms that the body, both online and offline, is a key component to gay representation. Mowlabocus (2016) argues that since the internet’s birth, bodies are not bound by physical location and have found new life online, demonstrating the migration of metropolitan gay subculture and the speed that gay men embraced new online spaces. However, academics John Pachankis et al. (2020) studied the mental health of gay men surrounding stress and anxieties within gay communities which they argue is “determined by unique competitive pressures arising from the stress of social and sexual interactions within the gay community” (p. 714). This is supported by academic Stephen Amico (2001), who states that the obsession surrounding visual representation of the idealised male body is extensive within gay communities and cites its reliance and use within gay subculture as reinforcing social hierarchies.

As investigated within this study, the obsession encompassing the male ideal or ideal body within online gay communities can be potentially damaging for the mental wellbeing of Instagays and viewers alike surrounding such imagery online (Kumar, 2020). Therefore, Instagram and its complexities for gay men are examined within this study, focusing on the growing Instagay phenomenon as gay men have begun using the visually based platform. I therefore propose from the findings of Campbell (2004) and Mowlabocus (2016) that Instagay culture is embedded within the Westernised metropolitan gay model.

### ***Home by Matt Lambert (2017)***

Matt Lambert is a gay culture photographer who in 2016 undertook a project where gay men were sourced from the popular gay dating application Grindr as well as the social media platforms

Facebook and Instagram (Bondi de Antoni, 2016). The idea for the project, explained by Lambert, came in response to the mass shooting that occurred at Pulse on June 12, 2016 (Stansfield, 2016). *Guardian* columnist Owen Jones (2016) stated **that** the attack was the worst mass killing of



**Figure 8:** *Home* (cover) (Matt Lambert, 2017).

LGBTQ+ people in Western society since the Holocaust. Lambert explains **that** he was approached and commissioned by Grindr's Creative Director Landis Smithers to produce a series of portraits, and both parties agreed a project depicting the importance of safe spaces was needed following the mass shooting at Pulse (Stansfield, 2016). Grindr published the resulting project as a photobook, making it to date the first and only photobook published by the company. The resulting project by Lambert, entitled *Home* (2017), is an in-depth exploration into safe spaces (both physical and digital), commenting photographically on their importance for gay communities, and was made as an artistic response to the views of conservative America that mocked the importance of gay safe spaces (Lambert in conversation with Stansfield, 2016). "Until you've felt uncomfortable and unable to express your identity or sexuality in public spaces, you can't necessarily understand the value of safe spaces" (Lambert in conversation with Bondi de Antoni, 2016).

The forward for *Home* (Lambert, 2017) was written by Canadian photographer and artist Bruce LaBruce. During an interview with Stansfield (2016), Lambert stated **that** LaBruce was an important inclusion to have the voice of the previous generation present within the project to further highlight the historical significance of safe spaces within LGBTQ+ history. This **shows** that despite differing generations, safe spaces are still as important nowadays as they were decades prior. The location and parameters of what a twenty-first-century safe space looks like for gay



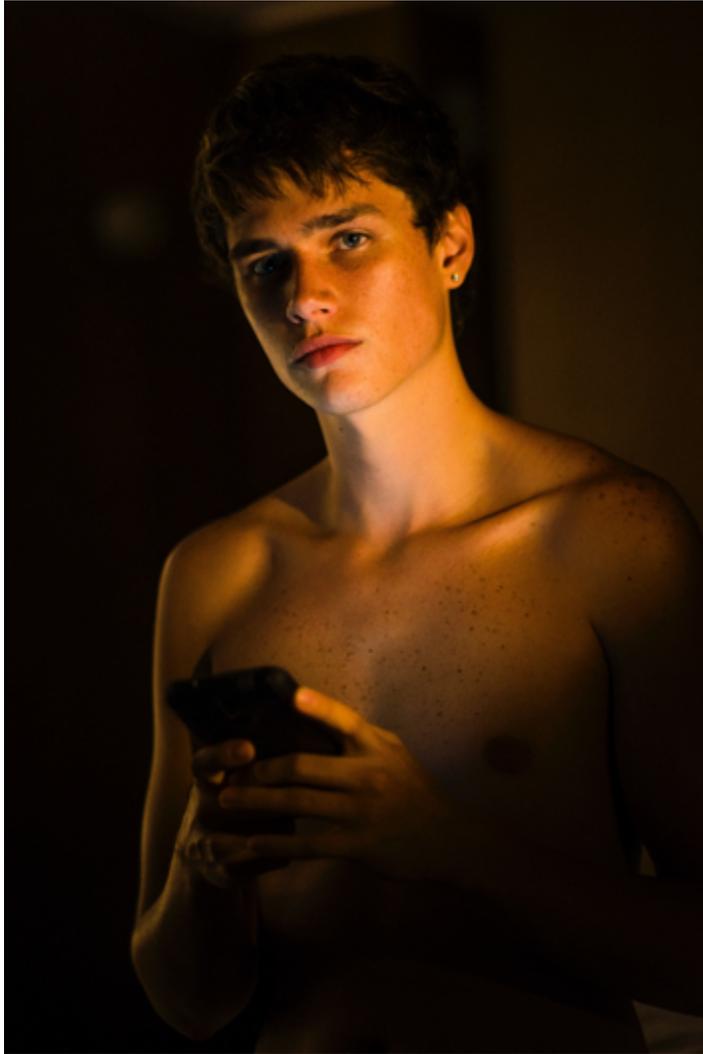
**Figure 9:** *Home* (pages 75 – 76) (Matt Lambert, 2017).

communities may have changed, but the need for safety, community and shared life experiences with likeminded individuals is still a fundamental necessity of the physical or digital spaces. Most of the participants Lambert approached for *Home* (2017) were in their early twenties, and

Lambert stated that the first space his participants felt safe and able to express themselves was online (Bondi de Antoni, 2016). They could have intimate conversations with other LGBTQ+ youths, share experiences and for “the first time they could present their true selves” (Lambert in conversation with Bondi de Antoni, 2016). Discussing his casting process further, Lambert (in discussion with Stansfield, 2016) explains that social media platforms such as Grindr, Facebook and Instagram were used to further make links with the digital space and online aspect of the work and the generation that typically use such platforms.

The development and rise in popularity of social media has enabled a new generation of gay men to create a new form of safe space digitally (Stansfield, 2016). This also allows LGBTQ+ members to connect and form relationships over the internet, and offers people the ability and opportunity to step outside of their reality and still feel connected to the community. Lambert’s project title of *Home* (2017) came from the common saying “Home is where I lay my head”, further explaining that home for Lambert is a safe space where individuals feel comfortable enough to be themselves; it’s a space we feel deeply connected to (Lambert in conversation with Bondi de Antoni, 2016). This analysis from Lambert of what home means extends beyond a physical space and suggests it is possible to find feelings of home and safety within other spaces such as an online community:

It's by no means meant to be an anthology of what digital relationships or virtual intimacy looks like, more just a snapshot of about twenty people that I'd met and had a conversation with about the ways digital or virtual spaces have helped them find a sanctuary or solidarity. (Lambert in conversation with Stansfield, 2016)



**Figure 10:** *Johnny* (Matt Lambert, 2017).

Much of Lambert's photographic practice deals with intimacy and digital spaces and is not aiming to present a view of social media with the idea that romance and love is dead due to the internet, but is rather a celebration of the amazing changes the internet has set in motion (Stansfield, 2016). Within his photographic practice, Lambert focuses on LGBTQ+ culture but predominantly gay men, as that is his life and the life he knows; therefore, it heavily influences his practice. Digital spaces have been life-changing for young gay men and the community it offers: "I'm trying to focus on the positive" (Lambert in conversation with Stansfield, 2016). However, this statement alludes to Lambert's knowledge and semi-ignorance that although digital spaces can be positive, negative elements exist

and are often overlooked and ignored. Therefore, social media, like many physical or digital spaces, has potential good and bad connotations but how digital spaces are navigated and interacted with is up to individual users, as no two individuals are the same.

### 1.3 Instagram

Instagram, a mobile photo (and video) capturing and sharing service, has quickly emerged as a new medium in spotlight in the recent years. It provides users an instantaneous way to capture and share their life moments with friends through a series of (filter manipulated) pictures and videos. (Instagram, 2013 cited in Hu et al., 2014, p. 595)

As evidenced through the analysis of *Home* by Lambert (2017), Instagram can function as a form of online safe space for gay communities. Within this section, the mechanics of the platform and its rise in popularity are examined. Instagram is a visually focused social media platform that uses photography and video to solidify its relevance as one of the most-used social media apps of the twenty-first century (Leaver et al., 2020). From 2010 Instagram grew in popularity, to become the fourth most downloaded app of the decade, with an audience of over one billion users (Leaver et al., 2020). It has become an online space where communities converge and converse (Leaver et al., 2020). Commerce has become part of the viewing experience of the app through the rise of social media influencers and new forms of content creators aiming for authenticity and self-representation on a format ultimately known for representation through selfies (Leaver et al., 2020). Leaver et al. explain how Instagram became so popular due to its use of visual media:

After all, Instagram is synonymous with the mass popularization of mobile, app-based photography. Filters and square frames, part of Instagram's initial affordances, made millions of people armed with nothing more than an iPhone feel like they were crafting photographs that suggested the professionalism of paid photographers (regardless of whether these feelings were justified). (2020, p. 1)

Thus, creating photographic content has become normalised by making it simple enough that anyone armed with a camera phone can create their own imagery, where historically to be a photographer in the professional sense required a deeper understanding of the mechanics of a camera. However, it must be stated that Instagram was not the first photo-sharing platform and was not the pioneer in the use of square frames and photographic filters, but its success arose by combining these elements that already existed in various forms on other apps (Leaver et al., 2020). Instagram is currently the most popular and most profitable social media platform of the decade

and is owned by Facebook, who purchased the site in 2012 for £720m (Shead, 2019). However, Instagram, as opposed to Facebook, is an exclusively visual platform where users share photographs and videos to their profiles. Followers can choose to engage in the form of likes, comments, shares etc. Engineered differently to Facebook, Instagram allows users to choose how much or little they interact with followers on the platform:

The non-reciprocal nature of ties on Instagram means, moreover, that one can follow many people unlike oneself and see content mostly from those people. While this scenario is not implausible on platforms like Facebook with reciprocal ties, it is less likely because Facebook contacts need to approve friend requests which imply a tie visible to others and grant reciprocal content access. (Birnholtz, 2018, p. 9)

With Facebook, a basic level of interaction is required to accept or decline a friend request (the same can be applied to a private Instagram account); however, a public Instagram account does not require this interchange, meaning a following can be created with minimal interaction with individual users. Highfield and Leaver (2016) examined “Instagrammatics” (p. 50) by studying visual social media through a range of methods (selfies etc.) on Instagram; they identified that the visual is a key component of everyday life, especially online, and therefore academics should alter their view on how it is researched. Instagram is more than a social media platform; it is an online space that can be used to understand visual social media culture by examining how individuals and online communities engage and interact within the ever-changing online space (Leaver et al., 2020). Therefore, Instagram is a range of things; it is not simply a social networking tool: “it is an app; it is a series of programs and algorithms; it is a gigantic database of images, videos, captions, comments, geolocative tags, location tags, likes, emoji and more and more items over time” (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 8). Instagram represents various things and acts differently for each user, thus validating the use of Instagram within this study as more than a social media platform. I used Instagram as a personal communication and research tool to contact and examine Instagay accounts and gay subculture online first-hand through my own Instagram account by positioning myself as a gay follower.

Instagram aims for a younger demographic than its predecessor Facebook, as identified by Leaver et al. (2020). As Instagram has grown, it is argued, so too has narcissism (Fishwick, 2016; Williams, 2016; Hinsliff, 2018). Bate (2016) states that voyeuristically observing others through photography is an ingrained human characteristic which feeds curiosity and can boost our own underlying narcissistic tendencies. Therefore, the Westernised metropolitan gay model, previously identified by Sinfield (1998) and Campbell (2004), can flourish on Instagram due to it being a visually driven social media platform. It is hard to say definitively that social media encourages narcissism; however, it is clear it offers a platform for subconscious pre-existing narcissistic tendencies to flourish (Fishwick, 2016). “Sharing selfies on Facebook, for example, has been shown experimentally to affect others’ impressions of the sharer in terms of perceived narcissism, which is higher for selfie posters, and attraction, which is lower for selfie posters” (Birnholtz, 2018, p. 2). This links again to arguments of narcissism online and the assumption that individuals use such spaces to gain validation and praise to boost self-esteem and social-worth.

Journalist Zoe Williams (2016) notes that this behaviour is due to celebrity culture, stating that it has become routine for celebrities to share the banality of their lives on Instagram and fill it with moments that make up their day. Williams (2016) argues that “once you are important enough, nothing is mundane”, and this falsity therefore ultimately spills over into non-celebrity, with individuals recording their own mundane activities as evidence of significance. However, journalist Gaby Hinsliff (2018) argues that having narcissistic tendencies in small doses is good, as it means higher confidence and body positivity which is better than a lack of self-esteem. In contrast, Ewing, in his book *The Body* (2000), states that viewing such imagery of idealised representation of another individual can have negative connotations and incite obsession and feelings of inferiority in a viewer. I argue that this can be applied to the imagery posted online on Instagram, where viewers are oversaturated with a never-ending stream of idealised representation on accounts that focus on an individual’s physical appearance, such as that of Instagays and influencers. This raises questions about the safety spaces like Instagram offer gay communities when the emphasis is so heavily visually focused.

## Instagay



Figure 11: #gay (Instagram, n.d.).



Figure 12: #instagay (Instagram, n.d.).

Previous research has been undertaken by Campbell (2004), Mowlabocus (2016) and Cassidy (2020) into the complex and important relationship gay men share with online spaces and social media. Cassidy in his book *Gay Men, Identity and Social Media: A Culture of Participatory Reluctance* (2020) states:

In fact, it has been well documented in academic arenas since the very beginnings of the public internet, that online spaces designed for the GLBT community have been highly significant in the lives of young gay men. (Cassidy, 2020, p. 8)

Although gay individuals make up a small percentage of the online community, it is a space gay communities have always explored (Mowlabocus, 2016). On Instagram, some members of online gay communities have used the space to generate social media popularity to a degree which awards them Instagay status: “Instagram is being made over by gay men” (Cain, 2015). If someone identifies as heterosexual, this is a phenomenon that potentially passed them by due to the range of gay-exclusive hashtags that establish a world online such as #gay, #gayboy, #gayguy, #twink and #instagay to name a few (Cain, 2015). To understand the framework of what deems an individual to be an Instagay, it must be noted that there is a hierarchy element to social media rooted in misogyny (Mowlabocus, 2016), not just within gay communities but generally online. Scholar and author Crystal Abidin (2018) states that as digital technologies have evolved, and through the creation of social media, online fame has become easily accessible with individuals using social media as a communication tool allowing direct access to a digital audience. When discussing ideas of excessive fame and popularity online, Abidin states that “Influencers are the epitome of internet celebrities, given that they make a living from being celebrities native to and

on the internet” (2018, p. 1). The influencer phenomenon created the era of online fame with individuals using social media for mass exposure of self, “often at the expense of the free labor offered by their loyal followers” (Abidin, 2018, p. 13).



**Figure 13:** *hairs a lil grown out at this point now* (Jacob Leech, 2020).

Physical attributes such as the idealised body (Ewing, 2000) can propel individuals on social media to become idolised and often sexualised by viewers; therefore, the more attractive and impressive the physique, the greater the chances of rising above the masses. “Instagays are exactly who you think they are: sexy, gay men who flaunt their bodies on Instagram and rack up thousands and thousands of likes” (Oliver, 2019). Popularity online comes from individuals inciting feelings of voyeurism within viewers: “everyday internet celebrity generates feelings of affect and connectedness from regularity and consistency” (Abidin, 2018, p. 36), hence creating a voyeuristic following that consume their content online. This can be true for Instagay accounts

that post frequent selfies or shirtless selfies, using the iconography of the body as a commodity online to gain popularity. Instagay culture can often overlap with influencer culture, with some Instagays reaching a level of popularity on Instagram which affords them opportunities to do posts for brands, thus potentially generating a source of income from their online popularity:

The market value of Instagram Influencers is usually proportionate to the number of followers they have. Many clients who engage Instagram Influencers for advertorials and brand ambassadorships pay them according to their “reach,” or the number of potential consumers who would come across Influencers’ content. (Abidin, 2018, p. 79)

The popularity and online fame associated with social media influencers and Instagays is therefore recognised by mass media due to the vast audiences these individuals can generate (Abidin, 2018).

The Instagay phenomenon uses online spaces paired with the self-promotion capabilities of social media by using photography and video to amass visual appeal from an online audience. Many Instagays, however, do not fall into influencer culture. Only a small percentage with a substantial following can turn online popularity into a career; therefore, many Instagays, despite having thousands of followers, have day-to-day jobs and simply post content for continued engagement with followers. Selfies, as a form of self-portraiture, are often used as visual tools to engage with followers and generate interest in online accounts, often including hashtags to help steer online traffic towards their account (Abidin, 2018). This is confirmed by scholar and author Katrin Tiidenberg (2018), who in her exploration of the selfie states that although the term selfie is relatively new, selfies share historical reference to aspects of self-representation present within photographic portraiture. Influencers and other individuals with significant popularity, such as Instagays, exhibit social and technical skills to successfully maintain online visibility within online spaces to effectively rise above the masses within the overly saturated sphere of social media (Abidin, 2018).

The more popular an individual, the more followers and likes are generated, resulting in more exposure to similar accounts; this is due to the algorithm of Instagram that purposefully steers and generates online traffic towards popular accounts, depending on the account engagement data already collected within the application about a user (Constine, 2018). The algorithm was introduced in 2016 so the platform could use data collected on each user to tailor individual News Feeds and suggest other accounts and content it deemed of interest. Factors used are:

- “Interest – how much Instagram perceives a user will want to see a post based on past viewing of similar content;
- Recency – how new the post is; and
- Relationship – how close a user is to the user posting the content. This is determined by a range of things, including frequency of past liking, comments and being tagged in photos together.”

(Leaver et al., 2020, p. 18)

Viewing habits on Instagram inform the imagery and traffic it generates to steer users towards specific content, which brings in the topic of communities and how online creators such as Instagays and viewers of the same type of imagery are steered towards one another by the algorithm. Thus, gay users are directed towards one another as Instagram collects data on each user. Leaver et al. (2020) clarify that many algorithms are active within Instagram simultaneously, including suggesting posts and accounts to follow, matching accounts and content, and viewing data to generate suggested posts for the explore page. Online, as identified by many academics and researchers (Campbell, 2004; Albury, 2015; Mowlabocus, 2016; Lucero, 2017; Cassidy, 2020), is used as a space where gay users interact with gay communities and experiment with representation. Instagays seemingly follow the historic gay iconography surrounding the male body which has associations with homoerotic representation present within gay pornography (Mowlabocus, 2016). Thus, Instagays are using their own bodies as a commodity and erotic objects online for gay representation and popularity:

I used to get stuck in a habitual cycle of attempting to re-create the popularity of my previous posts, which became damaging to my wellbeing. I became self-aware the idealised version of myself I was portraying online was a falsity or gay fantasy and could be potentially damaging to others' wellbeing as well, as they compared themselves to that online version of me. (A. Schiavo, in personal communication February 7, 2020)

Another stereotype closely linked to online gay culture is that of the "shirtless selfie" (Birnholtz, 2018); the less clothing worn, the more interaction the post gets. As discovered through personal communication with participants during the practical photographic research, all participants stated that their most-liked posts were always the ones in which they wore the least clothing. Unsurprisingly, due to this phenomenon, members of the online gay community are often accused of being shallow and misrepresenting gay life online (El Khatib, 2018). Posting a shirtless selfie comes with a range of social and personal risks depending on the context and its intended audience (Birnholtz, 2018). Shirtless selfies are used by Instagays to generate online attention quickly, with individuals often posing shirtless within a photo where the caption and context do not correspond. Researcher Kath Albury (2015) conducted a survey where participants discussed their perception



**Figure 14:** *You guys like my new floor lamp?* (Sam Morris, 2019).

emotional scars from adolescence; social media allows users to seek the affirmation which being part of a supportive community of strangers online can offer (Cain, 2015). “One might even say that deep down a disproportionate number of gay men struggle with low levels of self-esteem” (Cain, 2015). Thus, online spaces are used as portals allowing online gay communities to network and interact safely due to the physical distance and security digital platforms, such as Instagram, offer.

Through exploration of the symbiotic relationship between Instagram and Instagays (and gay men using social media in general), **it is understood** that online is a space of social interaction and public

of individuals showing off their bodies, sometimes masking their actual intent by framing a post as being about something else. Posing shirtless or nude and adding an unrelated caption (see figure 14) is a practice closely associated with Instagay culture.

However, Instagay profiles can act as spaces where gay men feel secure and safe to act out a side of their personality in front of an “invisible audience” (Lucero, 2017, p. 125). As youths, many members of the gay community were left feeling alienated by a society that told them it was wrong for a boy to act feminine **and that it** could lead to public ridicule and shame (Cain, 2015). Despite however much an individual **has** learned to love their sexuality, many still carry the

performance; it also simultaneously offers safety from the physical world. However, Instagram, through first-hand research and personal communication, has been found to also hold complexities, one of which is potential harm to mental wellbeing surrounding the choice of imagery used by Instagays for self-representation (Oliver, 2019; Kumar, 2020). This is due to the reliance of idealised representation (Ewing, 2000) within the imagery present on social media and within accounts curated by Instagays; this



**Figure 15:** *Untitled* (Jamie Morgan, 2020).

oversaturated use of idealised representation online is potentially damaging for individuals, generating feelings of inferiority. To further understand the social hierarchy and behaviour of gay communities online (Mowlabocus, 2016), the iconography surrounding representation must be examined to potentially understand how the online space for gay communities may not be as safe as assumed at the start of this study. Photographic portraiture is used as a method and form of experimentation within the study as a possible form of safe space, attempting to offer Instagays a different form of representation away from the idealised and often sexualised representation they embody online.

## 2. Methods and Processes

The research for this study began from personal curiosity; as a gay-identifying man that first-hand engages with forms of social media, it quickly became apparent that online there is a social hierarchy within the gay community surrounding misogyny and the metropolitan gay model, as explored in the previous chapter explaining what characteristics are used by individuals to claim Instagay status on Instagram. There are pre-existing studies examining how gay men use the online space (social media specifically) as a form of online safe space (Mowlabocus, 2016; Lucero, 2017). However, I was curious: How safe or unsafe is Instagram? What are the unsafe complexities of the Instagram safe space for gay men? One example of the complexities is the often sexualised and idealised representation of gay men and their bodies on Instagram, posted on Instagay accounts for likes and followers, and the negative effects the oversaturation of such imagery online could potentially have on viewers and Instagays alike.

Fascinated by the phenomenon of Instagays, who could amass thousands of followers and likes just by posting selfies and flaunting their bodies online (Oliver, 2019), the aim of this study was to establish contact and personal communication with Instagays exclusively through Instagram, with no prior form of contact, and to enquire if they would consider sitting for an intimate photographic portraiture session within their own homes. The home was chosen as the primary location for the exploration of photographic portraiture due to assumed connotations of safety gay men feel within the home space (Hughes, 2002; Gorman-Murray, 2006; Gorman-Murray, 2007). This is where the first of the two methods used within this study was incorporated: photographic portraiture. This method was used as a practical experimentation to see if portraiture as a pictorial space could offer Instagays an alternative safe space to be more genuine away from their idealised online performance, examining if there was more to these seemingly idolised men than what is presented for their followers online. This was also the rationale for choosing to photograph the portraits with a painterly aesthetic reminiscent of Dutch paintings such as *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (Vermeer, c.1665), endeavouring to remove the stereotype and gay iconography surrounding the homoerotic representation of the (gay) male body and attempting, through experimentation of the portraiture genre, to photograph the participants as gay men within the privacy of their home as opposed to their idealised self-representation from Instagram. Assumptions and depictions of

homoerotic iconography surrounding gay representation and the male body are evident; see examples from Lambert (see figure 10) and Mapplethorpe (see figures 26–27), who both photographed gay men with an assumed gay audience in mind, and both sexualised and turned their sitters into erotic objects for the assumed gay viewer (Clarke, 1997).

The second method used within the study is personal communication, between myself and the Instagay participants prior to, during and after the photographic portraiture session within their homes, to help gain a deeper understanding of the mindset of an Instagay away from their online audience. The aim was to meet these hypersexualised Instagays and photograph them one-on-one within an assumed private space to see if they were the same person behind the scenes at home as they perpetuate to their assumed gay audience online. By meeting the participants of this study, frank conversations and exchanges occurred of often differing viewpoints on the topic of social media as a safe space for gay expression. For example, one participant said he enjoys social media because he could post what he wants, when he wants and be as overtly gay as he wants and his followers will like and comment regardless. Another openly admitted feelings of being trapped by his social media performance and stated it can often feel suffocating with constant attention from followers who sexualised him and attempt to make contact. Both gay men frequent the same online space of Instagram but have drastically differing views regarding its use.

For the final photographic outcomes made during the process of this study, I endeavoured to remove connotations of eroticism from the gay image and representation. Therefore, all the final photographs taken within this study (besides Ethan, see figure 1 and figure 33), are fully clothed to consciously move away from the stereotype of gay representation being about the male body as an erotic object for gay viewers. Ethan's portrait was taken shirtless as an experiment to see if the body can be shown within a traditional photographic portraiture format without being sexualised. However, upon showing the photograph to peers, they all noticed his defined torso first, seeing him first as an erotic object over an individual. This is why all the following portraiture sessions with participants were clothed so they could be seen without potentially being sexualised. The aim was to depict the Instagay participants as normal gay men, not the idolised and hypersexualised fantasy versions of their representation present on their online profiles, but first and foremost

normal men, which all participants were when interacting one-on-one within their homes and during online communication.

This is potentially where a new contribution to the topic of Instagram and its complexities surrounding alternative self-representation used by gay men can be discussed; by showcasing differing photographic representations present within the photographic portraiture versus their online profiles, and the performance they choose to present for the camera depending on the intended audience. Photographic portraiture is offered not as a space of authentic representation for the participants but as a space where an alternative form of self-representation can be explored one-on-one through portraiture away from the invisible and assumed gay audience present online. This is communicated by making visual-based research; the photographic nature of this study brings a new contribution to this research topic. It has the potential to encourage and open conversations to a wider audience than theoretic research on its own, due to the accessibility and visibility of photography.

### **Ethics and Digital Contact**

Early on, the research encountered many ethical concerns, the majority surrounding topics of anonymity and privacy for potential participants. The first of many ethical concerns that needed to be navigated was the inclusion of social media, as potential participants for the study were all approached via Instagram. The aim of the research was centred around assumed safe spaces and attempting to photograph participants within the home environment due to the assumed connotations of safety and security linked to the space (see chapter one). The introductory communication via Instagram was often met with silence. What became apparent from using Instagram as the first contact method was the control it offers users. Participants had control over who can and cannot contact them and whether they wanted to reply or not. If not, they had the options to simply delete messages, mark them as unread or, in extreme cases, completely remove the message and block the contact, preventing any future interactions. Therefore, messages online can be easily lost or ignored in a fashion that face-to-face communication cannot. This confirmed the distance and safety Instagram offers users, not only online, but also physical interactions. Essentially, once a user is blocked, communication is denied digitally which terminates any chance of physical communication. As the first form of communication was made online, a degree of trust

needed to be built and established with each potential participant that responded online. This trust formation through personal correspondence online was essential for the participants' safety, as well as my own, so neither party felt they were in any form of potential harm by interacting with the other face-to-face.

Personal communication established through Instagram was used so potential participants felt comfortable enough with regards to their personal safety to grant access to their homes for the photographic portraiture session. In some cases, where potential participants felt reservations about inviting a stranger from Instagram into their home, a prior meeting was arranged in a public location. However, this was not the case with the final four participants, who all willingly granted access to themselves and their homes without the need for prior physical introduction. The participants that agreed to take part in the photographic portion of the study all consented to being photographed and gave permission for their real names, Instagram usernames, profiles, and posts to be used within the research. Due to the ethics surrounding anonymity within research, this was difficult to gain clearance for. However, as all the information included within this study is publicly accessible online via their Instagram profiles, it was approved. As the study focused on Instagay accounts, visible examples of Instagay imagery and accounts were needed as reference to understand how Instagays navigate and present themselves online through the self-taken imagery they choose to post online for their assumed gay audience. This was ethically approved by all participants who willingly signed documents agreeing to waive their anonymity to be photographed, named, quoted from personal communication, and have their Instagram accounts potentially used for visual references within the study.

By gaining first-hand experience using Instagram as a research tool for communication online and visual research, it is possible to see how online spaces have become a seemingly safer environment for gay communities away from the homophobia and potential physical prejudice of reality. Instagram and the hours of screen time accumulated during online interactions and examining Instagay accounts quickly became fundamental to the research process throughout the study. Its methods of use facilitated the realisation during the study that Instagram is not simply a social media application; its influence and potential is much further-reaching than a photo-sharing platform (Leaver et al., 2020). Instagram as an online space became essential to the study

(specifically during COVID-19) as it was not just involved as a means of communication, as previously discussed, but as a twenty-first-century research tool. Instagram, however, only provided digital interaction and communication. This is where the method of face-to-face interaction within a participant's home is introduced, with portraiture used to experimentally examine if it can be used as a form of safe pictorial space, potentially offering Instagay participants a space to explore alternative, and potentially more genuine, forms of their gay representation away from their pre-existing online representation.

## 2.1 Portraiture

### The Performance of Portraiture and the Ideal

Experimentation with photographic portraiture is explored within the study as a possible form of safe space potentially offering Instagays a different form of representation away from their idealised representation prominent online. Following the exploration of physical and online safe spaces and their necessity for gay communities, the next stage of the study focuses on photographic portraiture by discussing findings and examples of potential pictorial safe spaces, performance, artistic bias and staging. However, to first understand portraiture and the assumption of authentic representation and depictions of “inner self” (Clarke, 1997, p. 101) associated with the genre, historic conventions surrounding portraiture and representation need context.

The stylistic choices associated with portraiture existed within the art realm prior to photographic portraiture using such methods; therefore, the genre merely appropriated pre-existing portraiture conventions used within painting and sculpture (Bate, 2016). With early forms of painted portraiture created with individuals sitting for lengthy periods of time, over time the stereotype evolved that portraiture represented accurate depictions of self as far as a sitter's likeness was concerned, with assumptions within the genre that an accurate representation of inner self can be captured (Clarke, 1997). “Today authenticity represents the search for individuated space outside the commodity form and outside the spectacle” (Goldman and Papson, 1996, p. 142), highlighting how the importance has shifted away from the spectacle associated with the performance of portraiture and moved towards attempting to capture authenticity.

When taking a portrait, there are conflicts of interest: the photographer is attempting to capture the sitter as their genuine self, and the sitter is preoccupied in ensuring the photographer captures the performance they wish to perpetuate for the intended audience. Following this summation, the intent of both sides is for differing outcomes from the same scenario; the contradiction within portraiture surrounding the ability to capture the inner self or “authenticity” of the sitter, who is engaging in a performance for the sake of the camera, subverts the assumed authenticity of portraiture (Clarke, 1997). Portrait photographer Sean Tucker (2016) explains, in a portraiture masterclass published on YouTube, the experience and intention of a portrait photographer versus the sitter’s agenda:

That’s the portrait photographers’ job, to see the real you and capture it in that moment. It’s really hard nowadays. I think it’s always been difficult but even more so now in a very individualistic world. Most of us walk around with a very, very polished and prepared persona, a view of ourselves we like to sell the rest of the world and we keep who we really are pretty well hidden by and large. (Tucker, 2016)

Photographic portraiture is used as a tool not only to observe ourselves but also to explore how we see one another (Bate, 2016). The key elements essential for creating a strong portrait include “face, pose, clothing, location and props” (Bate, 2016, p. 89). One word stands out prominently over the others when discussing the idea of an authentic portrait and that is pose, which implies some form of performance or staging. Academics Eric Guthey and Brad Jackson (2005) state in their journal article *CEO Portraits and the Authenticity Paradox* that:

Ironically, many such photographers contribute to the perception of their own authentic artistic identity by foregrounding the staged and therefore problematic nature of authentic identity in their photographs. (p. 1,069)

This creates a paradoxical action as the staged nature of portraiture is actively and constantly disagreeing with the very ideals of what it means to be seen and captured authentically. *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* (see figure 16) by Johannes Vermeer (c.1665) is arguably one of the most recognisable portrait paintings, yet little is known of the sitter as an individual (Sooke, 2014). The

artist or photographer therefore, with regards to portraiture, holds much more power over how the sitter is represented than the sitter themselves, despite it being their likeness (Bate, 2016). The sitter's likeness is captured and depicted the way the artist or photographer deems fit for their work. However, this is not to assume the sitter is powerless: a portrait can only work depending on the believability of the performance being portrayed by the sitter. The following subchapters examine a series of portraiture case studies chosen to further explore if and how photographic portraiture can act as a safe space where veracity may be achieved.

## Case Studies

### *Girl with a Pearl Earring*

The Dutch painting by artist Vermeer, c.1665, is a strong visual and aesthetic reference for the practical element of this study and methods. Its poetic use of lighting, composition and pose depicts the idealised and stereotypical assumptions of what a portrait represents and aims to communicate. This assumption and ingrained reference, stemming from the historical background of portraiture painting, perpetuate this idealised image that photography since its conception has aimed to replicate through the lens as an exploration of representation. It is ironic that the very nature of portraiture is to capture the representation and identity of an individual, yet this cannot be said for



**Figure 16:** *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (Johannes Vermeer, c.1665).

*Girl with a Pearl Earring*, where, despite being a portrait, the sitter's identity is unknown. Although various theories have speculated about her identity, we will realistically never know the name or identity of Vermeer's sitter (Sooke, 2014). *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* (Vermeer,

c.1665) is one of the most famous and recognisable faces within historical art depicting the stereotypical ideals of what portraiture encapsulates visually, yet the very sitter who contributed to its creation is unknown, contradicting the ideal that portraiture is about the subject, as it is the artist who, in this case, is remembered, not the sitter (Sooke, 2014). Therefore, *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* (see figure 16) is an early example that during the formative years of portraiture, artists merely used the medium as a reflection of self:

Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. (Wilde, 1891/2012, p. 5)

The statement taken from Oscar Wilde (1891/2012) suggests that even when capturing another, it is still inevitably about the artist or photographer: their subject, their vision, and their inner self exposed within the work. A portrait, as Wilde (1891/2012) states, is about the artist and they are imposing their own vision, self and bias upon the work. Vermeer was “a master of light who specialised in painting women in sparse domestic interiors” (Sooke, 2014). This use of lighting evident within *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (see figure 16) and Vermeer’s use of the domestic as a location for his portraits are fundamental reasons it became a key reference for the photographic research within this study. Subconsciously, I was trying to recreate Vermeer’s aesthetic in photographic form to make “the perfect portrait” of each sitter, again as stated by Wilde (1891/2012), and by imposing my bias on the outcome over the accurate depiction of the sitter, the final photographs are a more accurate depiction of myself as opposed to the sitters. Vermeer’s work found notoriety within the era of Dutch paintings as his paintings were very minimal for the era (Sooke, 2014). Even though the aim and general assumption of portraiture is to capture a representation of a subject as authentically as possible, he was inadvertently crafting their image by his own design, just as I have done photographically within this study.

### **Daguerreotypes**

As previously addressed by the points of both Clarke (1997) and Bate (2016), early forms of portraiture photography such as daguerreotypes appropriated the visual language of Western



**Figure 17:** *Untitled* (Unknown photographer, c.1850).

paintings such as Vermeer's (c.1665) *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (see figure 16). Daguerreotypes were the most popular form of portraiture during the nineteenth century, being used as tools of social **status** and identification (Bate, 2016). In

various ways, the daguerreotype at the time was the "perfect portrait medium" (Clarke, 1997, p. 103). This was in part due to its speed, with an exposure being captured and produced within a time frame of 3 to 15 minutes (Library of Congress, n.d.). However, as the exposure was lengthy and sitters needed to remain static, many were staged using either head rests or chairs so the sitter could remain as motionless as possible to avoid blur, to achieve the best possible results (Library of Congress, n.d.).

The photographing process of daguerreotypes therefore raises questions surrounding accurate representation of the sitter and characteristics of staging within the portraiture genre. Therefore, a daguerreotype cannot be classed as a genuine form of portraiture used for accurate representation due to it relying heavily on the **need for subjects to be posed** (Clarke, 1997). Daguerreotypes were taken using a plate which captured a mirror image of the sitter "not as we see ourselves, but as others see us" (Clarke, 1997, p. 103), thus feeding the narcissism of sitters, allowing them to observe themselves in a mirrored reflection the same way they are viewed by others. By linking the narcissistic tendencies and performative nature of sitters who wished to be photographed for public display, "It gave, that is, the public image of a private person" (Clarke, 1997, p. 103).

Daguerreotypes were one-off originals that could not be reproduced due to the singular plate method used during the exposure; thus, they had to be displayed and protected in frames and cases,

communicating through the physicality of the photograph that the portrait was cherished (Clarke, 1997). Sitters were fed a feeling of familiarity surrounding daguerreotypes as many media outlets such as magazines and newspapers of the era would include short stories idealising the Daguerreian portrait as a revolutionary medium capable of capturing “its subject’s inner character as well as his or her appearance” (Dinius, 2012, p. 3). However, contradictory to this, Clarke (1997) states daguerreotypes were not the correct medium to accurately depict inner character due to **the** overly formal and staged nature within a studio environment, with sitters required to remain motionless for extended periods of time. Daguerreotypes were, therefore, a social invention used to exploit the sitters’ narcissistic desire to have their likeness captured and viewed, just like the present-day phenomenon of social media which exploits users’ **pre-existing** narcissism surrounding self-image and likeness within photography viewed online.

### **Richard Learoyd**

The final case study exploring portraiture is contemporary photographer Richard Learoyd. Many portrait photographers take influence from paintings. This is evident within Learoyd’s portraits; his use of lighting gives his photographs a painterly aesthetic. Contextual references can be clearly observed between Learoyd’s portraiture and Dutch portraiture paintings like *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (see figure 16). Both Clarke (1997) and Bate (2016), as previously discussed, explain **that** early forms of photography took inspiration from the work of portraiture paintings. This is also true of the Daguerreian portrait that Learoyd feels a close affinity with regarding his own photographic practice. In conversation with Peggy Roalf (2015), Learoyd states **that** he sees his photographs as an extension to the lineage of the French daguerreotype method:

I see my work more in the lineage of the French—referring to daguerreotypes: those non-reproducible photographic objects whose multi-planed surface and miraculous depth of field fascinate me . . . I think you get that sense with daguerreotype images: you see the object before the illusion. (Learoyd in conversation with Roalf, 2015)

Learoyd’s portraits are created using a large camera obscura which captures an upside-down reflected view of the environment; **this** reflected mirror image is what is used to create the exposure (Fraenkel Gallery, n.d.). They are created from two rooms within his photographic studio, one of

which **has been** transformed into a room-sized camera, **and** the second adjacent room is where the subject is positioned, both rooms connected by a lens (Fraenkel Gallery, n.d.). “I suppose something in me craved a sense of power or directness in my work that I felt was lacking in my landscape photographs. Working with the camera obscura seemed to satisfy this need” (Learoyd in conversation with Roalf, 2015). The resulting portraits demonstrate how portraiture photographers prioritise their own visual bias over capturing an accurate representation of the sitter; therefore, sitters are props used by photographers to help produce the intended outcome the photographer seeks.

Further staging and performance within Learoyd’s portraits is evident as sitters must remain motionless for lengthy periods of time due to the unpredictability of his method; thus, all his portraits are of sitters seated with deadpan expressions, reminiscent of historical Daguerreian portraits. Learoyd explains in his own words during a video interview with San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2018) that he will position the sitter in front of the camera, then enter the room-sized camera obscura to make refinements to the sitter’s position. “I do all that is necessary in advance to get the picture I need” (Learoyd in conversation with O’Hagan, 2015). Therefore, Learoyd uses his sitters as props for his personal vision **as** opposed to focusing on capturing an accurate representation of the sitter; each portrait is created in a staged environment, with each sitter asked to perform in front **of** the camera. This contradicts the assumption that portraiture is a method of capturing an accurate representation of the sitter’s “inner self” (Clarke, 1997, p. 102).



**Figure 18:** *Agnes in Red Dress* (Richard Learoyd, 2008).

All forms of portraiture evidenced from **the** case study examples highlight how portraiture was used to capture a likeness of the sitters, but not their authentic representation. Thus, this exploration into pre-existing forms of portraiture found it to be a staged practice. Photographic portraiture can offer individuals a form of safe pictorial space to explore alternative forms of their own self-representation but capturing an accurate representation of a sitter's "inner self" (Clarke, 1997, p. 102) is an outdated ideology. Personal interaction and communication during the first-hand photographic portraiture research with Instagays **are** examined next to explore if photographing within a private and personal space (their homes) and its assumed attributes of safety can potentially tease out a more genuine representation in comparison to the idealised alternative they present on Instagram.

## 2.2 The Home

During the formative stages of the research, the importance of the assumed safety associated with the home as a physical space (see chapter one), outside of the fakery of Instagram, was an essential exploration I endeavoured to examine through personal communication and photographic portraiture. Practical first-hand research was conducted with each participant within their home, which quickly became an integral aspect of the research into the study of safe spaces and the way individuals act and interact within them. "Home for me is a place where you feel comfortable, a place you feel deeply connected to" (Lambert in conversation with Bondi de Antoni, 2016). The assumption is an individual can be their most genuine and free from outside pressures and scrutiny within the safety and familiarity of the home (Gorman-Murray, 2007). The justification for **exploring** the area of online identity versus real-life identity through safe spaces was to gain access to users sourced through Instagram with zero prior contact, to discover if these Instagays were the same way in person one-to-one as they perpetuated online. While photographing the Instagay participants who agreed to be part of the study, it was important that they were photographed using film photography (35mm and polaroid) early in the process. Looking back, it was a conscious decision to move away from the instant gratification of digital photography, which is commonly associated with social media, adamantly wanting to move away from this and force participants to wait for the photographs, which in digital photography is a rarity due to its instantaneous nature.

This to some degree removed their authority and ownership over their own image and likeness by withholding the photographs from them and myself until the film was developed.

This method and stylistic choice of conducting a photographic portraiture session using film photography contributed to a calmer experience as neither the participant nor myself knew what the photographs would look like until developed. This is a benefit of film negatives as the participant cannot see themselves in the moment on a screen to change their posture, facial expression or performance for the camera. Bate (2016) states the importance of portraits, not just for identification, such as passports etc., but also because individuals recognise the importance and social implications of looking good on important occasions when photographs matter. Essentially individuals like to look and feel confident in their appearance and appear potentially desirable to others:

How we look to friends and family in photographs matters (especially for example in social rituals like weddings, birthday celebrations, religious ceremonies, vacation trips, meeting people on the internet etc.), because we know the photographs are not only part of our looking at one another, but also involve part of how we see each other. (Bate, 2016, p. 81)

Bate (2016) addresses the differences between looking and seeing; this is the justification for the practical photographic research undertaken, to potentially make viewers question representation within the online space versus alternative forms of self-representation offline, such as photographic portraiture within the home. Portraiture sessions were predominantly conducted using natural light with the objective to make the participants appear unguarded, with a seventeenth-century Dutch painting aesthetic, like the visual language used within Vermeer's (c.1665) *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (see figure 16). Throughout the study, participants were photographed using a variety of methods. The first was the painterly aesthetic closely associated with historic conventions of portraiture as a representation of self (see appendices 1–4 and 8–9). The second method was to give the participant complete control over the portrait session, such as deciding what to wear and how to pose (see appendices 5–6). The third method was using artificial lighting and flash to recreate some form of falseness to the photographs associated with Instagram and digital photography (see appendix 7). In the final process, I, the photographer, was not present at all.

Participants were given a polaroid camera containing a single polaroid exposure (see appendix 10), meaning that what they photographed was the only outcome. Therefore, there was no option to re-take the photograph, which as Bate (2016) states is a practice commonly associated with the throwaway nature of digital photography. The following subchapter is a reportage-style account of personal communication undertaken during a photographic portraiture session with participants Jacob Leech (see figure 3) and Jamie Morgan (see figure 4) on the morning of February 7, 2020, both of whom have over ten thousand followers on Instagram.

### Landcross Road

February 7, 2020.

It was the morning of the photoshoot with both Jacob and Jamie at Landcross Road. Little did I know that morning the significance the three-story suburban student house share would become to the exploration of photographic portraiture and safe spaces. Arriving at Landcross Road, I rang the doorbell not once but twice; no reply. Knocked twice; no reply. Did I have the wrong house? Messaging Jacob through Instagram, I asked if his doorbell was working; he messaged back straight away saying it wasn't. At the time, this was slightly puzzling; expecting a guest but neglecting to communicate the doorbell doesn't work and only responding to the door once contacted through Instagram. The door opened and I was embraced by Jacob; he indicated how nice it was to finally meet and after pleasantries were exchanged, he reluctantly acknowledged, "Well we better head on inside and introduce you to Jamie. Ignore all the mess, we haven't cleaned in weeks" (J. Leech, personal communication, February 7, 2020). The first thing I noticed stepping over the threshold was the muted lighting. As my eyes adjusted, I could see coats hung up on one another. On the floor was a collection of shoes, all mixed together, and on the opposite side of the hallway on the floor stuffed in the corner was a pile of junk mail. From the hallway, the kitchen at the back of the house was visible, giving a glimpse to a sink full of dishes. Jacob ushered me into the very first door on the left which he instructed was his room. Upon entering the space, he read something in my expression I wasn't aware of, prompting, "I know, it's disgusting. This is what living with a bunch of students gets you. I hate it here and can't wait till I can move in June. It's a fucking dump" (J. Leech, personal communication, February 7, 2020).

Jacob's room in contrast was organised, occupying the very first room on the ground floor which looked out onto the main road at the front of the house. His room contained an old-fashioned fireplace that was now bricked up, painted white and was being used for shelving. This was affirmation to the fact every room within the house (besides living room, kitchen and bathrooms) had been converted into a bedroom to get as many tenants as possible within the property, with each bedroom a different space depending on the occupant. Jacob confessed he had the biggest room as he was the first to move in so got first pick. His windowsill, looking out onto the street, was adorned with houseplants. "Will this lighting work? We got lucky with the weather today, it's never normally this bright in Manchester" (J. Leech, personal communication, February 7, 2020); I insisted it was fine and he suggested we find Jamie. Leaving his room, we headed for the stairs

at the end of the hallway. Passing another doorway on the left, with the curtains drawn, something grabbed my attention in my peripheral vision: two Christmas trees. Two **six-foot** fully decorated Christmas trees stood side-by-side. Jacob laughed at my surprise and stated, “I love Christmas, I just love it. It’s my favourite time of the year. I never want it to end” (J. Leech, personal communication, February 7, 2020). I regarded them sceptically; was this a form of escapism for Jacob, using the lingering presence of Christmas, and the joy it provides him, as a distraction from his surroundings? A surreal and unexpected time lapse back to December despite being in early February, yet there they stood, two Christmas trees. The living room also contained two sofas, closed curtains and a table full of alcohol bottles and discarded cups. I mentally questioned if there had been a party recently; this was confirmed by a foil banner half visible and hanging from the wall with the only word identifiable being ‘Happy’, the remainder of the text lost behind one of the sofas.

Following Jacob upstairs, the first door at the top of the stairs was Jamie’s room. Inside it was much smaller than Jacob’s room, just big enough for a double bed, wardrobe and desk with a **single** window overlooking the garden. The first thing I noticed was atop his desk was an Apple MacBook Pro open and playing a song by Charli XCX featuring Kim Petras and Jay Park called “Unlock It” (2017). Jamie and I exchanged pleasantries, then Jacob asked who I’d like to photograph first. Jamie had made further plans that same afternoon. Although he seemed calm and relaxed as he styled his hair in the mirror, I still suggested I photograph him first. Jacob left us and Jamie proceeded to quiz me on what he should wear and about the lighting, which was muted in his room at the back of the house. He suggested we move to his roommate’s room at the front of the house. I enquired if they’d be okay with us using their room and Jamie stated it would be fine and ended the discussion with, “I’ll text him. He won’t care” (J. Morgan, personal communication, February 7, 2020). Picking up his Apple MacBook, now playing an up-tempo song I didn’t recognise, we walked to another room. It had the same layout as Jamie’s room except reversed; it was very minimal and non-descript of its inhabitant. Jamie articulated what I was thinking: “He doesn’t spend much time here now, he’s mostly at his boyfriend’s place” (J. Morgan, personal communication, February 7, 2020). It was too tidy in comparison to the chaos of the rest of the house. Jamie asked how long the photoshoot would take and I indicated no more than an hour, to which he finally confessed:

Oh, that’s good because I need to get to uni to finish my project for hand-in at the end of the week. I’ve been slacking and panicking but didn’t want to cancel and let you down. But an hour is fine. (J. Morgan, personal communication, February 7, 2020)

We began the photoshoot using a Pentax K1000 film camera. Jamie was so comfortable and effortless in front of the camera, asking for minimal direction but otherwise unfazed by the presence of myself and the camera. He was so comfortable that between photographs while I was setting up for the next exposure, he’d softly sing a few lines of whatever song was playing on Spotify at the time. He was comfortable and effortless in front of the camera. His phone was always visible and within eyeline on the bed. Every time the screen lit up with a notification, he’d ask if he could quickly check it or reply. He’d ask me questions occasionally, one of which was if I’d heard Selena Gomez’s **s** new album *Rare* (2020). I hadn’t, so he changed the playlist to her new album: “It’s good. Not worth the six-year wait between each album but it’s got some good songs” (J. Morgan, personal communication, February 7, 2020). We ended the portraiture session as I



**Figure 19:** 📷👤 (Jamie Morgan, 2020).

phone and once again thanked me before vanishing back into his bedroom.

Jacob helped me move my equipment downstairs. His room appeared different. He'd moved the bed so it was positioned lengthwise against the wall providing more space and had laid out clothing options on his bed. All of which, upon reflection, are contributing elements to the performance and staged nature of portraiture; I was subconsciously staging the scene for each photograph, not to capture an accurate representation of Jacob, but to capture his likeness. Jacob visibly altered during the portraiture session, going from carefree to a stern-faced model in front of the camera. Reflecting on the experience, I witnessed first-hand the shift in Jacob's visual performance, immediately recognisable from his Instagram account. Between exposures we'd talk and he would relax, flipping visually between the public and private performances. Looking back at the roll of developed 35mm film (see appendix 8), not a single frame of Jacob contained a smile, although behind the scenes and between exposures he smiled often. This is visual proof that the stereotypical assumption and meaning of safety within the home is changed once an alien presence, armed with a camera, enters. Both Jamie and Jacob were observed and photographed within their home in a

often do by taking a selection of Polaroids for my model archive and after he excused himself, carrying his Apple MacBook Pro, the music slowly became inaudible. I reflected on the session and at the speed it had taken place. Upon reflection, the session was very quick due to Jamie's comfortable demeanour in front of the camera; a performance he knew well, I mused. However, the session was rather disjointed; Jamie was unfazed by the presence of myself and the camera but was consistently drifting in and out of the experience because of his phone. Conscious about getting the session done quickly so he could get to university, yet he would stop multiple times just to check his phone; a juxtaposition of needs and timing. While packing the camera equipment to move downstairs, Jamie returned and asked if he could photograph one of the Polaroids and if I minded him posting it on Instagram (see figure 19). The session had finished less than ten minutes ago, and his thoughts had already turned to Instagram. He took a photograph of the Polaroid on his

staged setting by a stranger from Instagram, knowing that the photographs would be shared and potentially posted online. Jacob confessed that we wouldn't be doing any shirtless photographs as he had acne on his chest and was feeling self-conscious. I wondered fleetingly in that moment if his Instagram followers knew that this seemingly confident person has insecurities about his body like everyone else. While preparing to leave, Jacob made a statement which stuck with me: "You've glimpsed the mess and chaos behind the Instagram persona that no one online sees" (J. Leech, personal communication, February 7, 2020). Setting off for my journey home, I couldn't stop thinking about that statement. Was he referencing the discord of the student house share or referencing something deeper? Making a self-comment on himself and his current life situation, alluding to an omission that he knows and is self-aware of his idealised public performance online for others.

### **Erving Goffman: Frontstage/Backstage**

This subchapter contextualises findings surrounding social performance witnessed first-hand while conducting photographic portraiture sessions with Instagays, using findings by sociologist Erving Goffman (1956/1990) to theoretically examine two forms of social performance. Frontstage/Backstage are sociological terms by Goffman (1956/1990) used to address the idea of individuals performing for their audience; this can be applied within this study when exploring the performative nature of photographic portraiture and Instagays within the parameters of the online spaces in which they perform for viewers. Individuals, when performing this self-cast role, are essentially asking the viewer to observe them seriously with the performance they have created for the intended audience (Goffman, 1956/1990). When discussing performance, there are two extremes at play; the first is that the individual creating the performance is so engulfed by their own performance they themselves believe their own performance to be true and therefore a factual and an accurate representation (Goffman, 1956/1990). The second is that the individual creating the performance is the first to see it as such, meaning that the most qualified person to debunk a performance is the very person engaging in it (Goffman, 1956/1990). This analysis means participants within this study either subconsciously don't know they're conducting a visual and social performance for their intended audience, *or* they do and know they are doing it. Goffman explains:

When an individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term 'sincere' for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance. (1956/1990, p. 28)

The performance of a cynic is created for a specific purpose or created out of some form of necessity (Goffman, 1956/1990). Such a performance can result in distasteful and short-lived glee surrounding the masquerade of their performance (Goffman, 1956/1990). Carrying this over to the validation a user receives online from a selfie, for example, this affirmation can be fleeting as they know it's an idealised representation of self and therefore not obtainable, meaning users enjoy the attention but it is tainted as the individual is aware of its falsity. To understand the thought process of a cynic performance, an individual may choose to purposefully delude their viewers for self-interest and private gain (Goffman, 1956/1990). This explanation can apply to the study of the Instagay phenomenon, as they use Instagram, and the gay audience within, for personal gain and social popularity.

The Backstage aspect of the theory is described as “communication out of character” (Goffman, 1956/1990, p. 166), implying it is a more genuine representation of an individual away from their social performance and surveillance. Backstage behaviour and the absence of the audience alter how an individual will behave and interact, conflicting with when they conduct their face-to-face performances (Goffman, 1956/1990). This summation shows that when present in front of others, some individuals act out a performance of self that may be misleading and is created merely to serve a purpose. Following this thought process, the social performance of many individuals online is apparent. For example, an actor can perform a role on stage with the intent to convince the audience they are in fact said character; however, behind the scenes when the curtain falls, the actor slips out of character. This analysis can therefore be carried over to photographic portraiture and online space, more specifically Instagay culture, as viewers suspend their own beliefs to indulge in the idealised visual performance, all of which can be a potentially dangerous habit and can result in “anxieties related to their supposed physical shortcomings” (Ewing, 2000, p. 272) when idolising the representation of another.

Goffman (1956/1990), when discussing performances, states that when two individuals meet, they continue to present themselves to the other in the way they claim to be for performance sake and remain in character for the other individual, implying that even one-to-one encounters can be a performance stand-off. This was confirmed within the study through physical introductions and communication during the photographic portraiture sessions with participants who presented

themselves on camera the way they assumed I wanted them to be. Away from viewers and social media surveillance, Instagays act differently to the mass image they perform online for their followers. However, this behaviour is not exclusive to Instagays. This fluctuating Frontstage/Backstage behaviour is a common factor of everyday life for all individuals. Goffman (1956/1990) uses the example, when explaining the theory, of tradespeople behaving professionally to customers when face-to-face but behind the scenes, away from view, **they** may sneer and gossip about clients with other team members. Thus, individuals behave differently within a professional work environment than they would interact with family, altering behaviours furthermore when socialising with friends etc. It is as if individuals categorise behaviour and performances depending on environment and audience present. This can be applied to social media habits, with an individual presenting an idealised performance of self-representation for attention online from the masses, then offline, away from the digital audience, behaviour alters again away from surveillance.

However, since Goffman debuted his theory in 1956, there have been many that have questioned it and its legitimacy within sociology. Bruce Wilshire (1982) agrees that Goffman had the unique ability to identify similarities between Frontstage/Backstage performance and thus **it** is worth studying. **However, later in the same study Wilshire (1982) criticises the theory**, stating that at its core exists the idea of a “structure of appearances” (p. 290) which inhibits the theory’s legitimacy within sociology. Goffman (1956/1990) uses the public and private metaphor of performance to suggest that once an individual is Backstage, they are isolated from the Frontstage performance. **By contrast**, Wilshire (1982) argues that even during the Frontstage performance, an individual is aware **of** what they will do once the performance is over; thus, the Frontstage influences the Backstage. Wilshire (1982) surmises that individuals wear a mask to hide the real self even during Backstage encounters, **meaning that** the real self is unintelligible by another unless said mask slips. I agree in part with Wilshire’s (1982) argument that even during Backstage encounters, an individual can still be performing; however, I agree with Goffman (1956/1990) that Backstage representation away from viewers is a closer depiction of reality, **as** opposed to the masked appearance of self, suggested by Wilshire (1982).

### Analysis of Portraiture and Personal Practice

This study uses ethical and approved research methods (such as photographic portraiture and social encounters with Instagays in the home and online) and elements of the Frontstage/Backstage theory (Goffman, 1956/1990). A portrait is a photograph of an individual's face; this is how people identify one another and thanks to social media can be used to identify individuals we have never met. Bate (2016) explains the importance of the facial expression as an integral element of a portrait; this is how meaning and identity are captured and communicated. Photographic portraiture was used as a method attempting to offer an alternative safe space conducted within the home, to offer Instagays a different and possibly more genuine form of self-representation away from the pre-existing idealised representation they embody online. As for the stereotypical assumptions of authentic representation within the portraiture genre (Clarke, 1997), an accurate representation is not achievable within such a staged environment. The fact sitters know they are to have their likeness captured already implies the act of performance as being photographed is a contrived experience, often containing suggestions from the artist or photographer to help direct the sitter to best achieve the artist's vision for the outcome of the portraiture session:

It's the job of the photographer to capture the person behind the persona they present to the world by looking "for a chink in the armour" where the real person underneath all the falsity is revealed even if just momentarily. (Tucker, 2016)

I disagree with this statement from Tucker (2016) after conducting my own photographic research. If sitters appear to lower their guard as Tucker (2016) suggests, the viewers and the photographer have no way of knowing if it is genuine or a performance. The candour of a sitter's performance is not the task of the photographer or viewer to identify from observing photographs; it is not for the viewer to deem what is or is not an accurate representation of another. The only person who can argue the accuracy of their representation is the sitter themselves as photographers have their own agenda and artistic bias towards the work created. During the formative stages of the study, I assumed photographic authenticity would be achievable by capturing portraits of Instagays away from social media by working within a space they found safe such as the home; however, this was naive. I was incorrect to assume photographs of Instagays clothed within the home would be more genuine due to the familiarity of the environment and lack of surveillance,

forgetting that the camera represents the assumed audience regardless of the setting. Therefore, the resulting portraits are staged, meaning they are not accurate representations of the participants, just a likeness of them.

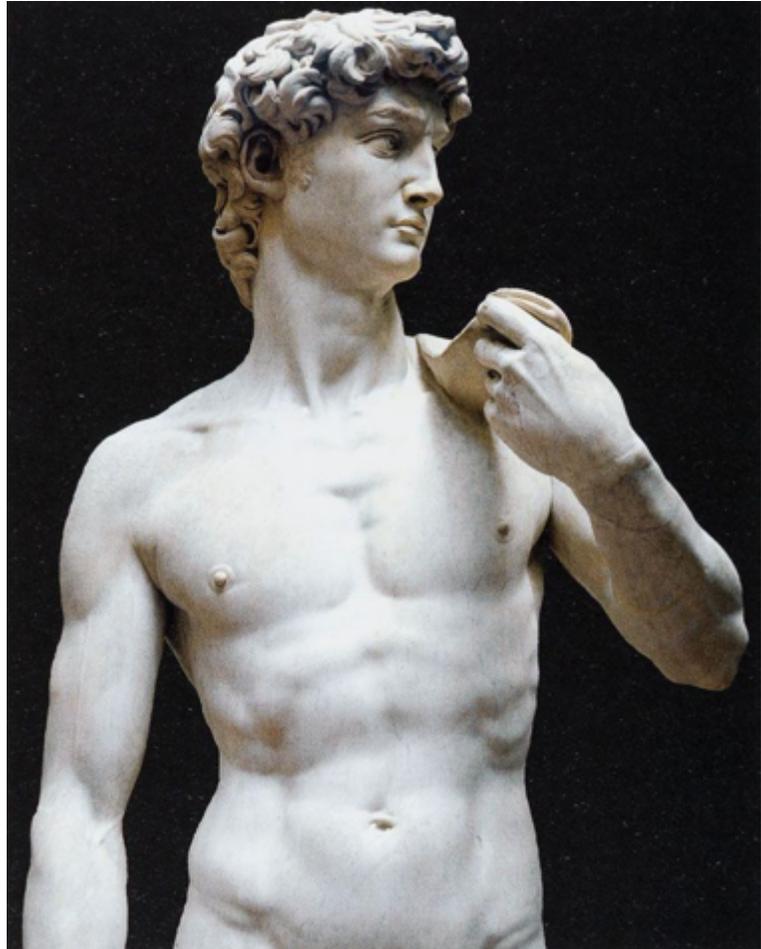
“Where do you want me? How do you want me to look and do you have a preference on what I should wear?” (J. Morgan, personal communication, February 7, 2020). These questions from Morgan during the photographic portraiture session confirm that he viewed this as a performance as he tried to determine what version of himself he should be in front of the camera. The final portraits produced (see figures 1–4) were the result of a Frontstage performance as explained by Goffman’s Frontstage/Backstage (1956/1990) theory. The portraits to varying degrees reflect myself more than the participants; by projecting my own visual bias onto the photographs, they are not accurate representations of the participants but rather a likeness of them borrowed for photographic representation. As soon as a sitter knows they are to be photographed, it is impossible to be unguarded, as authenticity cannot be obtained in a staged scenario; the only rational example with potential for authenticity is a candid portrait, in which the sitter has no awareness of the camera’s presence within the space at all (Bate, 2016). The portraits created within this study (see figures 1–4), however, are far from candid in nature.

As examined, the home is an important space for gay men, as stated by Gorman-Murray (2007) and Hughes (2002). However, photographic portraiture and social media, due to their characteristics of observation, subverted the assumed safety associated with home from a private space to one of surveillance. The home has become an extension of Instagram, with users inviting viewers into their homes through mobile devices and posts, using the home as the backdrop. Therefore, do Instagram accounts of Instagays act as a digital form of safe space for gay communities, despite this level of surveillance and potential harm surrounding oversaturation of the idealised body? The following chapter begins an exploration into the complexities of Instagram as a space and the importance of online spaces for LGBTQ+ communities. It begins by investigating gay iconography and how the historic visual representation of the male ideal is being followed by Instagays online.

### 3. Instagay Aesthetic and Instagram as a Safe Space

#### 3.1 The Male Body and Gay Representation

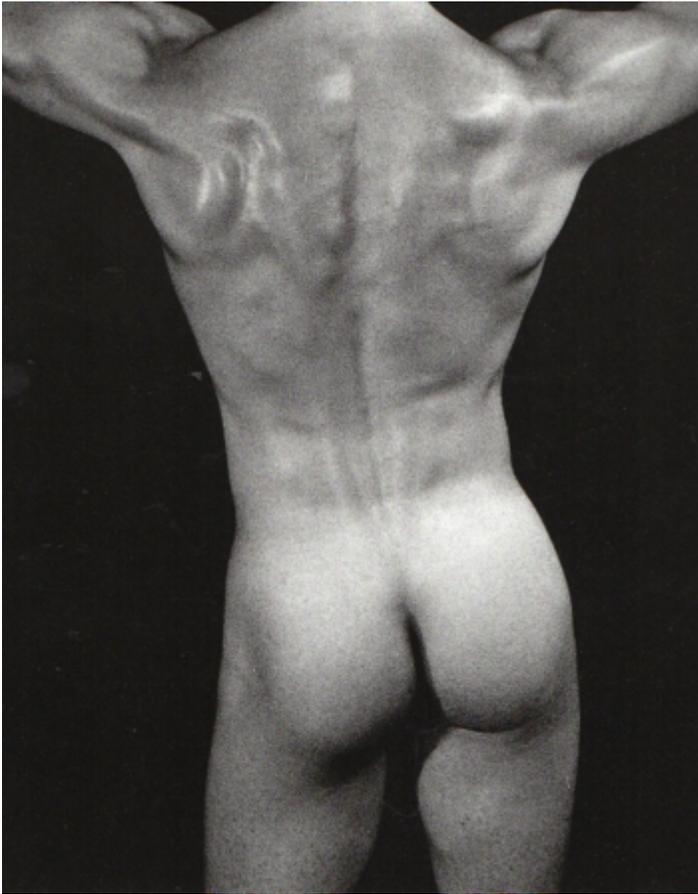
What are the politics behind Instagay visual culture, if such culture is placed within the traditions and conventions of gay iconography and photography? To understand gay iconography, first the iconography surrounding the male body must be explored to further understand how the history of male representation **has** influenced mainstream ideals. One of the **earliest** renderings of the male body comes from Greek sculpture, with **art historian** Kenneth Clark (1956/2010) stating **that ancient** Greece attached great importance and aesthetic appreciation to the body, supported by Asen (1998), who confirms **that** the body carried



**Figure 20:** *David* (Michelangelo, 1504).

great cultural value for **ancient** Greeks, who used it to depict what they saw as important. The aim of sculptors was not to capture an accurate representation of the human body as it appears but to create a depiction of the ideal (Clark, 1956/2010). Thus, Greek representations of the body didn't aim for reality; they aimed for an ideal of male beauty, free from the imperfections of the human form (Asen, 1998). The idealised body was also used within Greek sculpture to apply visual representation to the Greek Gods who were thought to take the form of perfect human specimens (Clark, 1956/2010). "The movement in Greek sculpture from individual bodies to ideal bodies is a movement towards universalisation and, in the case of repeated representations of Gods like Apollo, deification" (Asen, 1998, p. 57). **This confirms that** the representation of the idealised male

body was lifted above the norm to be worshipped and observed as a “deified body” (Asen, 1998, p. 54). The Greek sculptors used geometry and mathematics to imagine the ideal body proportions: “The Greeks valued the abstract beauty and clarity of geometry and this informed their aesthetics. Further, they celebrated well-trimmed bodies” (Asen, 1998, p. 54). It wasn’t just ancient Greek sculptors that valued the idealised male body. The Italian Renaissance, almost a thousand years later, rediscovered the ancient Greek ideal and appropriated the iconography of the male body, as evidenced in Michelangelo’s *David* (Asen, 1998).



**Figure 21:** *Untitled* (Western Photography Guild, c.1940s).

Historically the nude is an artistic study of the body and thus in the nineteenth-century the body would often be shown in its entirety (Ewing, 2000). However, photographic “fragmentation” of the body was a twentieth-century aesthetic where, rather than photographing the full-length body, a closely framed part of the body would be chosen to study and photograph (Ewing, 2000). The most common type of fragmented photography is linked to portraiture, where the head, neck, shoulders and chest are often fragmented from the rest of the body: “Such photographs fall clearly within the context of portraiture rather than the nude” (Ewing, 2000, p. 32). Photographic fragmentation is

common when wanting to present a body as an object as opposed to an individual, displaying the body as an erotic object of desire (Asen, 1998). This is shown in the homoerotic physique photography of the early 1940s and 1950s (see figures 21–23). “In photography, we must remind ourselves, photographs of the figure are not always what they seem” (Ewing, 2000, p. 64).



**Figure 22:** *Untitled* (Athletic Model Guild, c.1940s).



**Figure 23:** *Untitled* (Western Photography Guild, c.1940s).

In the 1940s and 1950s, homoerotic magazines found a way of offering gay audiences imagery that was part bodybuilder aesthetic, pin-up and nineteenth-century figure study repackaged as physique photography (Ewing, 2000). However, from examining the imagery (see figures 21–23), the homoerotic connotations are blatant in their original intent as gay erotica: “As blatant sexual activity was illegal, the erotic had to be suggested rather than shown, and motifs such as wrestling were means of legitimizing physical intimacy. However, the oiled bodies left no doubt that these were objects of desire” (Ewing, 2000, p. 214). Closeted gay photographer Minor White also photographed bodybuilder portraits for male physique magazines that, as writer and curator Kevin Moore (2015) states, they were poorly camouflaged erotica for gay men. These portraits taken by White share the same statuesque aesthetic and poses of Greek sculptures; however, they were often over exaggerated to better show off the male physique (Moore, 2015). This highlights that even when homosexuality was illegal, gay iconography around the male body and homoerotic imagery still existed, but it was presented to the public as something different to its actual intention (Ewing, 2000).

A large contributing factor to the identity formation of gay representation via the male body comes from gay pornography. To discuss and understand gay male sexuality and the role gay pornography plays in the representation of the body, it is necessary to acknowledge the vast influence feminism has had on facilitating conversations and debates surrounding the representation of the body during the 1970s (Mowlabocus, 2016). Many scholars have researched pornography and the strategies of

representation within gay male subculture, including Stoltenberg (1991) and Dyer (1992). However, Mowlabocus (2016) identifies that a large portion of academic discussions on pro-gay pornography suggests a multifaceted and complex relationship to the medium:

Patton (1995), Clarke (1991), MacNair (1996), and Williams (1992) all agree that gay male pornography serves a variety of functions (entertainment, education, validation, identification) that are either not present within its straight counterpart or, if they are, operate alongside other more culturally acceptable texts and forms that offer similar pleasures and instructions. (p. 65)

Gay pornography, due to its importance surrounding gay representation, should be viewed as a form of documentation to acknowledge its power for historical gay identity formation (Mowlabocus, 2016). This is evidenced by MacNair (1996), who states that in the 1970s, there was a rise in academic texts surrounding gay pornography because of the growing gay identity formation surrounding the medium (Mowlabocus, 2016). As images of the male body are prominent, eroticised and sexualised by the gay audience, as discussed, this explains why gay men belonging to the aforementioned Westernised metropolitan gay subculture identified by Sinfield (1998) are more comfortable discussing and owning pornography as it is used within the gay subculture for gay identity and representation. “Metropolitan gay male subculture, and its attendant identities, draws heavily on pornographic representations such as those offered in gay porn films, gay magazines, gay chat lines, and now gay digital spaces” (Mowlabocus, 2016, p. 66). Therefore, gay pornography and the iconography surrounding the male body and gay identity are delicately intertwined, reinforcing the hierarchy within the gay community that the body is a commodity as well as a form of representation (Mowlabocus, 2016). One cannot discuss gay male culture without acknowledgement of how central pornography has been historically “to the construction and maintenance of that culture” (Mowlabocus, 2016, p. 66). Researcher John Mercer (2003) discusses the repetition and construction of iconography and male representation within gay pornography, exploring the seemingly repetitive sameness that has become the norm when depicting gay men within pornography:

It is this very sense of sameness that I identify as one of the defining characteristics of the iconography and types deployed in contemporary American gay video pornography. My analysis concerns itself with the homosexual Prototypes in the texts of American gay pornographic videos. I am referring here to the recurrent deployment of an idealized, generic, muscular, male performer typifying what Richard Dyer has described as the ‘Californian ideal of a sort of clean anonymity’. (Mercer, 2003, p. 280)

The construction of this sexualised male ideal and the iconography surrounding it is made by gay men, for gay men, where masculinity is worshipped. This identifies the use of stereotypes when analysing the ideal which is influenced by popular culture and the historical arts, and the repetition of the ideal is what makes it such (Mercer, 2003). The depiction of the idealised and eroticised male represents desire, ideal male beauty and fantasy for the gay viewer, which are all “mythological homoerotic signifiers” (Mercer, 2003, p. 286). This shows links to the iconography of the Greek male ideal of *Apollo* (see figure 27) and that of Michelangelo’s *David* (see figure 20) and how these stereotypes of repetition have become the norm. Like the findings of Mowlabocus (2016), Mercer (2003) also identifies the importance of pornography as an important part of gay identity: “It should be noted here that pornography occupies a central place in gay culture as perhaps the predominant expression of gay identity, constructed by and for gay men” (p. 286). The homoerotic stereotype within gay pornography and gay culture is an object of desire and fantasy designed by other gay men for the gay viewer. This can also be true of Instagays as the ideal and gay iconography surrounding the male body has progressed online and steadily become more mainstream. Ewing (2000) argues that the idol or ideal body is one that can incite anxieties and feelings of inadequacy from the viewer; this is supported by the findings of Mercer (2003) who explains the ideal is a fantasy and therefore not achievable.

Ewing (2000) identifies cultural worship of the idealised standard of perfection seen as visually superior (models, celebrities etc.) and argues that idolising such visuals and false depictions of physical perfection can lead to obsession. “These are the true idols of our age, representing beauty, vitality, health, youth, even freedom” (Ewing, 2000, p 272). The Greek God *Apollo* was worshipped as the male ideal in ancient Greece (Clark, 1956/2010). Instagays are arguably a modern-day alternative, being followed and idolised by their thousands of followers online simply

for their bodies and physical appearance. A photographic example of the idol and ideal body identified by Ewing (2000) and how it links to the iconography of sculpture and has homoerotic connotations is male bodies in competition, where sculpted, well-trimmed, symmetrical bodies are championed: “The male bodies in competition with each other were also commemorated by photographers like Bruce of Los Angeles (Bruce Bellas), one of the finest most prolific of the breed of physique photographers who catered to homoerotic sensibilities” (Ewing, 2000, p. 283). As aforementioned, the 1940s saw a peak in male muscle magazines and semi-nude performances on stage for competitions dedicated to the idealised male body (Ewing, 2000). Competitors would show off their bodies covered in



**Figure 24:** *Third Place, Jerry Boily of Vancouver Beach, Venice, California* (Bruce Bellas, c.1957).

oil (see figure 24) and hold a statuesque pose to give the illusion that they were sculptures (Ewing, 2000). As shown in Bellas’s *Third Place, Jerry Boily of Vancouver, Muscle Beach, Venice California* (c.1957), the pose is reminiscent of Michelangelo’s *David* (see figure 20). The bodybuilder within *Third Place, Jerry Boily of Vancouver, Muscle Beach, Venice California* (see figure 24) appears muscular, well-proportioned, vascular, and is looking off to the right-hand side of the frame like Michelangelo’s *David*. Although taken centuries later, it demonstrates that the iconography surrounding the male body is historically ingrained and has become a stereotype for idealised male representation (Ewing, 2000).

Therefore, the male ideal may change over time depending on variables, such as location and decade, but there is most definitely a prototype rooted in the male ideal of Greek sculpture (Asen, 1998). However, Ewing (2000) hints that idol worship and examples of the ideal are always present but they may not always be a positive reading for viewers. Is there an underlying danger around the ideal and idol worship? This is explored later within this chapter, looking at the effects of the Instagay aesthetic seized from the iconography of the male body and how it is used online, but also how other gay social media users may experience feelings of inadequacy as a result. The body is used by gay men online within the context of social media for attention and popularity (Oliver, 2019). Whether they realise it or not, users are following the visual language that has existed for centuries, as evidenced within this chapter. To further understand the visual language and iconography that has been absorbed and used within the context of social media, we must first discuss not only what the body represents but go further and examine how and why the gay male body is depicted the way it is and the complex gay iconography attached to its representation.

### **Minor White**

Historically the body as an object of desire is associated with a female subject photographed in a subservient manner, taken by a male photographer from the perspective of the male gaze (Clarke, 1997). The male body is represented differently to that of the female body, although both have equal contextual traditions linked to classical art, but the homoerotic context and nature of the male body differs to the nude captured “through heterosexual eyes” (Clarke, 1997, p. 138). An example of a photographer who captured the male body in an erotic nature mirroring that of the female body is American photographer Minor White, who in 1940 created a series of male nudes (Moore, 2015). Prior to this, White, although a successful photographer, had not taken any explicitly homoerotic material due to homosexuality still being illegal and outside the societal norm of the 1940s (Moore, 2015).

White lived many years as a closeted gay man which became a source of frustration, plaguing him since his adolescence, until he felt compelled to explore his homosexuality through his photography, despite the risk of social rejection and legal persecution (Moore, 2015). White would photograph his male subjects and use the same iconography of the female nude to make his models appear passive by photographing his male nudes in a private space that the viewer of the

photograph voyeuristically looks in upon as an observer to the private scene (Clarke, 1997). Despite his exploration and frustration surrounding his own repressed homosexuality, White would photograph a range of homoerotic material but, as stated by Moore (2015), none of this material would be made public within White's lifetime:

White's own attempts to universalize such volatile private images took many forms. As discussed, the pictures of Cipolla reference an art tradition of the nude. Yet even with the artistic lighting, sculptural pose, obscured sex organs, and averted eyes, the subject matter remains too hot to handle; not surprisingly, none of the male nudes were published in White's lifetime. (Moore, 2015)

Referencing back to early depictions of nudes such as paintings that would exist purely for personal ownership not intended for public display or to be shared (Clarke, 1997), the same can be said for White who kept his male nudes private due to harsh treatment of gay men during the post-war period in America (Moore, 2015). Photographing and exploring the erotic, operates outside the social norms of censorship and self-denial, while simultaneously teasing gratification for desire (Asen, 1998). "But freeing oneself from repression runs the risk of scandal" (Asen, 1998, p. 59); this is the scandal that awaited White during the 1940s and 1950s if he made his male nude work public. White found an alternative safe space to explore his repressed homosexuality during the 1940s and 1950s through homoerotic photography that depicted the male body as an object of desire, with the photographs remaining unseen during his lifetime and only becoming public after his death (Moore, 2015).

### ***Portland (1940)***

Like the work of Greek sculptors, the male ideal is also present within White's work as evidenced within *Portland* (see figure 25). The model is muscular and well-proportioned as per the Greek ideal of male representation (Clark, 1956/2010; Asen, 1998). The photograph is taken not within a photographic studio but, as the framed image in the background indicates, in some form of room, presenting visual links to the voyeuristic nature of the nude (Clarke, 1997) as a photograph taken intimately between the model and the photographer. Thus, the viewer is intruding on a private exchange they should not be able to witness (Clarke, 1997). "Minor White (1903–1976)

*Portland* (1940), for example places the male body within the female tradition and gives to the male figure a similar frame of reference from a homo-erotic perspective” (Clarke, 1997, p. 138). This summation from Clarke (1997) shows that White aimed to photograph the male body in the same context as the female body. As stated, the pose and body language borrow the iconography of the female nude; however, as it is a male nude photographed by a male, it becomes homoerotic in nature and is offered to the viewer as an erotic object or fantasy (Clarke, 1997).



**Figure 25:** *Portland* (Minor White, 1940).

The model has his eyes and head downcast, avoiding direct eye contact with the photographer and viewer. Although a downturned head and averted eyes are all passive gestures present in the visual language of the female nude, there is also a juxtaposition of dominance present within *Portland* (see figure 25). The model is standing in a private space shared with White; however, a female nude when typically captured within a private space would be photographed on the bed, not stood atop it looking down upon it (Clarke, 1997). The model also has a dominant stance standing over the bed, hands fisted and placed on the model's hips, further depicting an assertive

and dominant pose, despite the passiveness first assumed. The large shadow is also a dominating presence within the photograph, giving a sense of grandeur to the model. The harsh light

emanating from the lamp bulb hitting the model's muscles reveals sharp, crisp, defined lines, further depicting a representation of the idealised male body. Clarke (1997) clarifies the observation of the intimate surroundings within the photograph and the relationship that forms between model and photographer:

The shadow on the wall and the picture behind make this part of a private space in which intimacy is about to or has taken place, so that the figure becomes part of the scene and suggests a relationship to the photographer which places him on equal terms. (1997, p. 139)

The link between the homoerotic nature of the male body is apparent within the photographic work of White but, as will be explored next, also the work of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. In their work, both photographers appropriated the iconography of the male body, endeavouring to recreate the sculptural male ideal of ancient Greece in photographic form, proving the representation of the male ideal and the connotations of homoeroticism have always been present throughout history.

### **Robert Mapplethorpe**

The majority of the photographic case studies conducted within this study – whether photographing the nude, portraiture or the body – have all been taken in a private space with only the sitter and photographer present to create an intimate connection between sitter and photographer. Mapplethorpe's work, like that of White (see figure 25), Lambert (see figure 10) and myself (see figures 1–4), were taken in an intimate environment. However, unlike the aforementioned, Mapplethorpe used his photographic studio as opposed to the domestic.

Moreover, Mapplethorpe's work implies a consensual, personal relationship between photographer and subject . . . In viewing his work, we too enter into this relationship. But we do not do so as third parties. Instead, we stand-in for Mapplethorpe and assume the intimate relationship he has established with his models. (Asen, 1998, p. 59)

The viewer can voyeuristically enter the intimate exchange from the viewpoint of the photographer but only to a limited capacity as the viewer cannot physically be in the room or studio to experience the intimate exchange between sitter and photographer (Asen, 1998). “Our voyeuristic relationship to Mapplethorpe’s male nudes arises out of an awareness of this abyss. We are not third parties, but we are not quite Mapplethorpe either” (Asen, 1998, p. 59). The difference between the work of White and Mapplethorpe is that Mapplethorpe, as stated by Clarke (1997), was an openly gay **photographer** creating photography with an assumed gay audience, whereas White was creating homoerotic work behind closed doors in the 1940s as homosexuality was still illegal (Moore, 2015). Mapplethorpe’s work, in contrast, is a blatant gay and homoerotic expression of gay representation and identity thrust into the mainstream.

Clear links can be drawn between how the ancient Greeks saw the male body and how Mapplethorpe chose to photograph his sitters as if at times they were in fact sculptures. Confirmed by Mapplethorpe: “If I had been born one or two hundred years ago, I might have been a sculptor, but photography is a very quick way to see, to make a sculpture” (Mapplethorpe in conversation with Kardon, 1986 cited in Szegedy-Maszak, 1991, p. 63). Mapplethorpe presented his models as objects “to be appreciated for their formal beauty – for the beauty of the human form” (Asen, 1998, p. 53). Therefore, Mapplethorpe and his photographic work surrounding the male body represent a depiction of what the traditional male body historically and culturally represents (Asen, 1998). Photography appropriated its iconography and visual language from paintings, but before that, paintings appropriated the same iconography and visual language from sculptures (Clarke, 1997; Bate, 2016). Mapplethorpe’s work in turn appropriated the iconography of the body present in classic Greek sculpture which, as aforementioned, is **historically** rooted in the status of the nude and body as an aesthetic (Asen, 1998).

**Throughout his career**, Mapplethorpe photographed a range of subject matter, **including** still-life, portraits, nudes (male and female) and self-portraiture, predominantly in black and white. As aforementioned, Mapplethorpe’s photographic aesthetic was heavily influenced **by** and appropriated the iconography and visual language of Greek sculptures (Asen, 1998). Researcher Andrew Szegedy-Maszak (1991) states **that** a large percentage of Mapplethorpe’s self-portraits resemble statues **due to pose and lighting**, using this strategy for the combined purpose of

admiration for Greek sculptures and exploration of identity. Clark (1956/2010) highlights key factors of Greek sculpture that Asen (1998) states are visible within the photography of Mapplethorpe, further showcasing the influence the iconography of the male body present in ancient Greek sculpture had on Mapplethorpe's photography. Thus, the aesthetic and ideals of Greek sculptures, as identified by Clark (1956/2010), are prominent throughout Mapplethorpe's photographic exploration and career; however, the comparison is most apparent when viewing his work on the male body.

The male body often has homoerotic connotations linked to the genre; this is especially apparent within the photographic work of Mapplethorpe and his sculptural representation of the male body. Mapplethorpe used appropriated visual ideals from Greek sculptures within his photography to question heteronormative society and gay fantasy (Clarke, 1997). As Mapplethorpe's photographs are "homo-erotic photography based on an assumed gay audience" (Clarke, 1997, p. 139), homoerotic elements are present within a large portion of his work. For example, Mapplethorpe's photographs of flowers, although not obviously sexual, have a potential homoerotic reading:

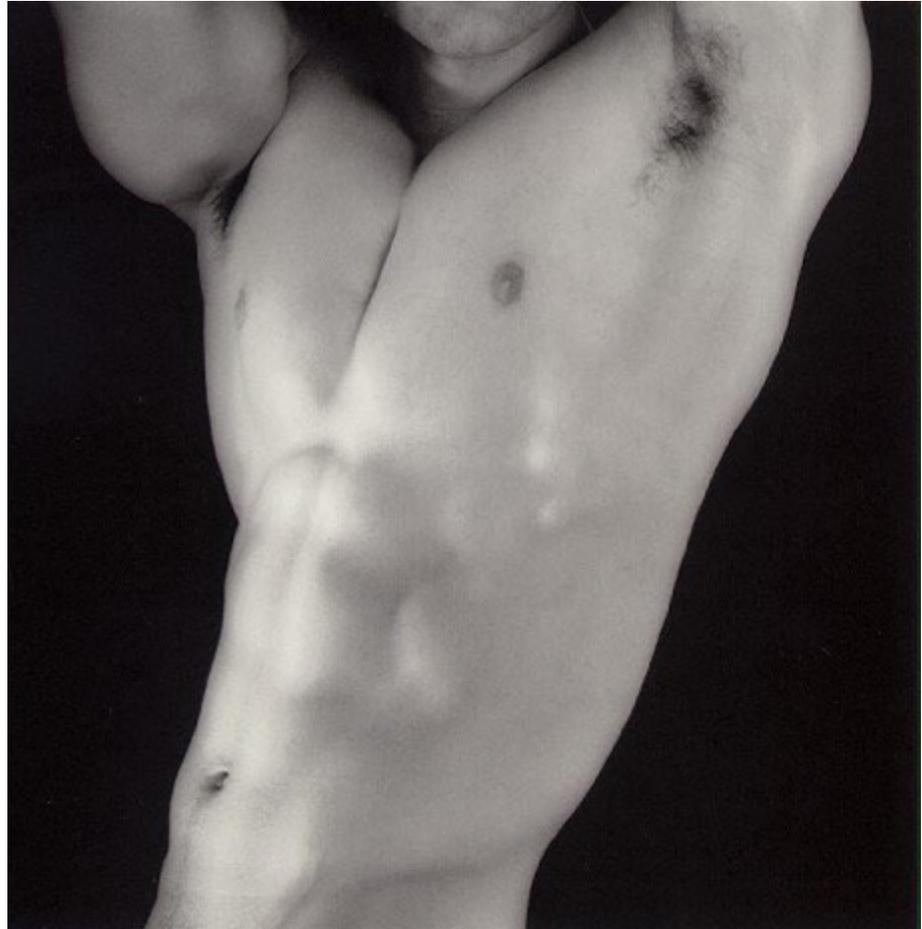
This connection between flowers and the male nude organ should not be surprising. Indeed, Mapplethorpe was drawing on a tradition in which fruit and flowers have been consistently used within an exclusively homoerotic context, an iconographic continuum which finds its roots in the homoerotic vase painting of the late sixth and early fifth centuries BC in Greece. The floral ring or laurel crown seen within Greek clayware was a consistent erotic motif and was one sign among many which alerted the Greek observer to a homoerotic content. (Schultz, 1998, p. 86)

This explanation from scholar Peter Schultz (1998) also indicates that homoeroticism and homoerotic depictions of men were present in ancient Greece and a common part of society, from idealised, homoerotic and muscular sculptures of Greek Gods to vases and clayware. Mapplethorpe's male portraits and male nudes, although containing elements of eroticism and sexual identity, focused on erotic as opposed to pornographic depictions of the male body (Asen, 1998). The passive nature of the male nude is also present in Mapplethorpe's work, where he presents his male models to the viewer as an erotic object or an object of idealised appreciation:

“Mapplethorpe’s models are passive figures who pose for the enjoyment and pleasure of the viewer” (Asen, 1998, p. 51). This references back to Clarke (1997), who states that female nudes were often presented in this way for the male gaze, whereas Mapplethorpe photographed his work with the viewpoint of a gay man creating erotic imagery for gay men.

### *Charles (1985)*

Mapplethorpe presented some of his models as erotic objects rather than individuals through his choice of framing, using fragmented crops to place emphasis on the body over the model’s identity (Asen, 1998). *Charles* (Mapplethorpe, 1985) is an example of this style of framing by focusing on the torso; the face is cropped out of frame, further separating the individual and making him appear as a homoerotic object (Asen, 1998). This is the



**Figure 26:** *Charles* (Robert Mapplethorpe, 1985).

intention with *Charles*; even the choice of bodybuilding pose is to make sure the viewer is solely focused on the well-proportioned muscles of the torso (Asen, 1998). Therefore, *Charles* (see figure 26) shows clear parallels between the work of Mapplethorpe and the appropriated male ideal from Greek sculpture:

Charles' torso appears sculpted. His skin is smooth and shiny. It provides a dramatic contrast to the black background of the photograph. Mapplethorpe employs chiaroscuro lighting, giving the model's chest, stomach, and abdomen a luster that immediately attracts the viewer's attention. Charles' skin itself appears like marble – connoting both strength and delicacy. Clarity characterizes the work as clean and crisp lines predominate. In this way, Mapplethorpe's photograph highlights the muscularity of Charles' body. His muscles are well-defined and neatly distinguished. (Asen, 1998, p. 52)

*Charles* has a stronger visual resemblance to a three-dimensional Greek sculpture as opposed to a two-dimensional photograph, showcasing Mapplethorpe's lighting which makes the model's body feel timeless (Asen, 1998). The lines on the body are clear and defined, with the use of light hitting the skin and emphasising the shape and proportionate symmetry of the muscles underneath (Asen, 1998). Mapplethorpe's male nudes are presented in an erotic context as objects of homosexual desire, highlighting how they are read differently depending on the viewer (Asen, 1998); for example, a heterosexual male would not look upon *Charles* (see figure 26) with the same homoeroticism and sexual desire as a gay male. The intimacy that Mapplethorpe created with his portraits and male nudes adds to the arousal of desire; they are erotic but not pornographic (Clarke, 1997). Pornography presents the body as a sexual object, allowing the viewer to dehumanise the body before them with a level of detachment: "In its typical formula, pornography invokes distancing mechanisms that invite one to feel one's control over the image, to feel what one is looking at is not a person but an empty vessel for one's ego" (Sischy cited in Asen, 1998, p. 58).

Although presented as objects of homoerotic desire, Mapplethorpe contradicted this detachment effect of sexual imagery and employed subtle effects that instead draw in viewers (Asen, 1998). For example, in *Charles* (see figure 26), the body hair visible on the sternum, the faint facial stubble, and how Mapplethorpe used the names of his models add a sense of individuality to the bodies and take a step away from the universalised male ideal that Mapplethorpe appropriated: "These details personalize the otherwise universalizing tendencies of Mapplethorpe's classicism" (Asen, 1998, p. 58), thus proving that individualism contradicts the historical sculptural ideal that Mapplethorpe found inspiring and that the male ideal is impossible to achieve. These differences remind viewers that *Portland* (White, 1940), *Charles* (Mapplethorpe, 1985) and *@ethan\_johnson*

(Richards, 2019), while all drawing influence from the iconography of the male body, are not the same person and do not have the same idealised and universal body (see figures 24, 26 and 1).

### *Apollo (1988)*



**Figure 27:** *Apollo* (Robert Mapplethorpe, 1988).

The link between Greek sculpture and his photographic work is something Mapplethorpe was abundantly self-aware of, evidenced by photographing the statue of *Apollo* (see figure 27). In doing so, he acknowledged the contextual and historical significance Greek sculptures had on his own photographic practice. The idealised body was used by sculptors in ancient Greece to depict the Greek Gods who were thought to take human form and be perfect human specimens (Clark, 1956/2010). Ancient Greek sculptors removed the imperfections of the

human body (Asen, 1998). This is apparent from Mapplethorpe's photograph of *Apollo* (Mapplethorpe, 1988) and Clarke (1997) argues it represents the ideal portrait of timeless male beauty as *Apollo* (see figure 27) is ageless and will remain an idealised depiction of male representation frozen in time. Mapplethorpe arguably did the same by capturing his models in this fashion, photographing them as if they were timeless sculptures, immortalised within his photography. Clarke (1997) explains the parameters of Mapplethorpe's portrait of *Apollo*, clarifying that it is not a stereotypical portrait as it is a photograph of a sculpture and not a person; instead, it is a physical representation of the male ideal from ancient Greece.

The Greek God Apollo in mythology represented “‘the most Greek of Greek Gods’, an ideal image” (Clarke, 1997, p. 101). This is supported by how important geomatics mathematics was for Greek sculptors when imagining and representing the ideal male body: “The Greeks had no

doubt that the God Apollo was like a perfectly beautiful man. He was beautiful because his body conformed to certain laws of proportion and so partook of the divine beauty of mathematics” (Clark, 1956/2010, p. 23). It makes sense why Mapplethorpe would photograph the sculpture of *Apollo* (see figure 27) to represent the ideal portrait as Apollo represented the ideal male in ancient Greece. Thus, Mapplethorpe photographing *Apollo* (1988) represents two things: first, he acknowledged the aesthetic from Greek sculpture he appropriated within his own photographic work. Second, as *Apollo* (see figure 27) represents the myth of the male ideal, Mapplethorpe’s photographic portrait of the sculpture of Apollo shows he identified that the ideal portrait of a sitter is also a myth: “Mapplethorpe’s photograph refers the portrait to a myth, not a history; to an ideal, not an individual” (Clarke, 1997, p. 101).

Ancient Greek and Renaissance sculptures, paintings, gay pornography, the photography of White and Mapplethorpe, and finally the bodies of Instagays online are all evidence that the male ideal is so embedded into the representation of gay men that some individuals online, whether self-aware of the process or not when taking their erotic selfies for Instagram, are following an iconography surrounding the male body and gay representation that is thousands of years old. The difference is that this type of imagery used to be controversial and only achievable by someone with camera knowledge; however, thanks to social media and the invention of camera phones, individuals are now able to create their own imagery, making the process and quest for the idealised body oversaturated online.

### 3.2 Instagay Aesthetic

This chapter has so far shown that depictions of idealised male representation existed before the advent of social media. This section now examines the aesthetic and visual language used by Instagays online. Cain (2015) states that the Instagay aesthetic is one which arguably defines the online space and Instagram but further explains that this is a phenomenon that may be missed by heterosexuals. Oliver (2019) summarises that Instagays are gay men on Instagram who flaunt their physiques for thousands of likes from followers. Journalists Blum and Osenlund (2019) state that Instagays are a persuasive and creative class of gay social media influencer, who use online personas to gain attention from voyeuristic bedroom selfies. This links back to the discovery that home, although a space formerly associated with privacy, is now a backdrop for online content as

social media is welcomed into the home via mobile devices. Take the example of two Instagram posts from Johnson (see figures 29–30); both are taken in differing locations within his home, on different days, and in both photographs he is shirtless. However, the visual language and aesthetic of each is identical; both examples contain similar lighting and poses to showcase an ideal likeness of Johnson’s shirtless body for online representation. The aim and visual language used within stereotypical Instagay social media posts is to capture an idealised likeness of self over an authentic representation of self.

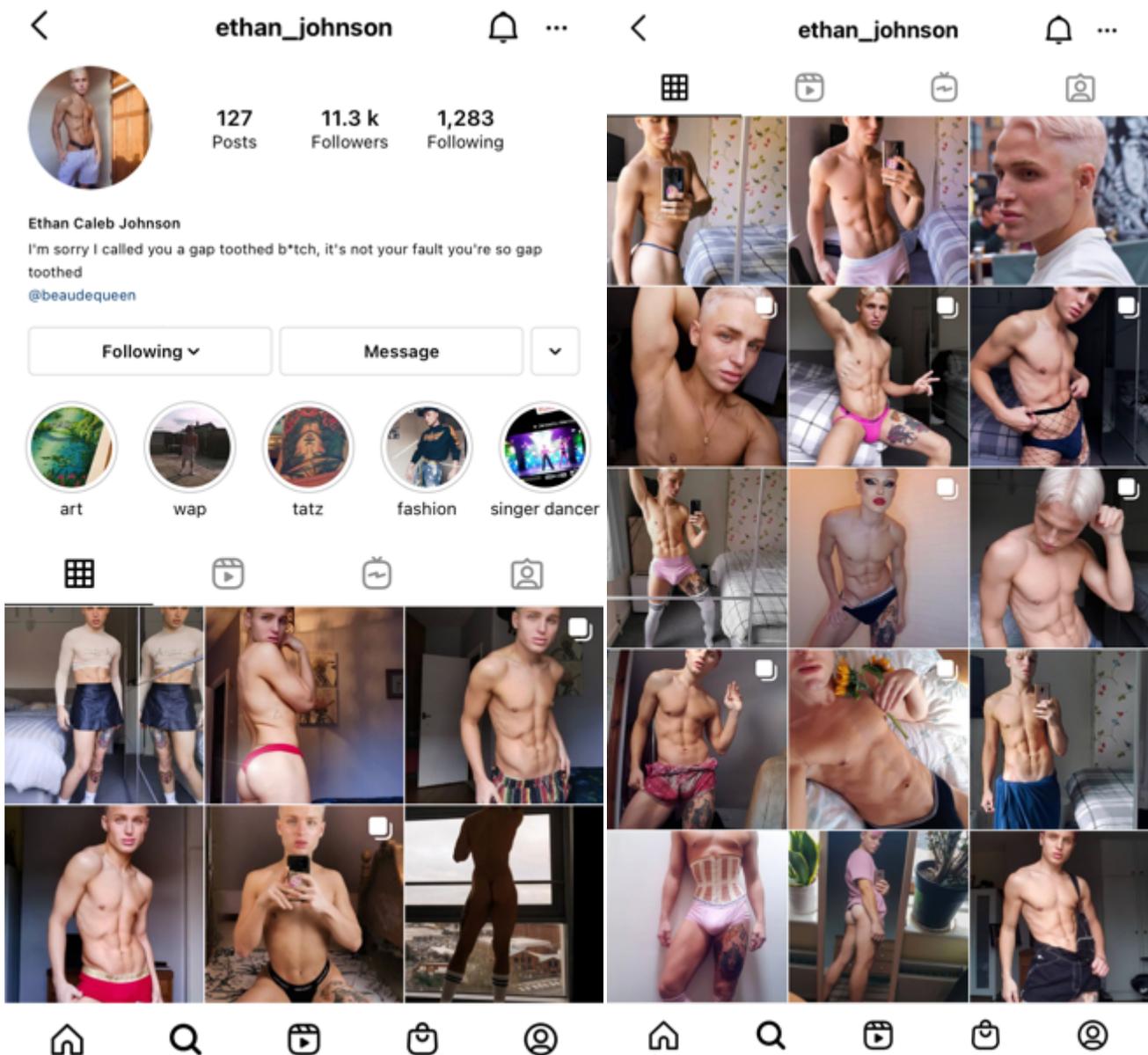
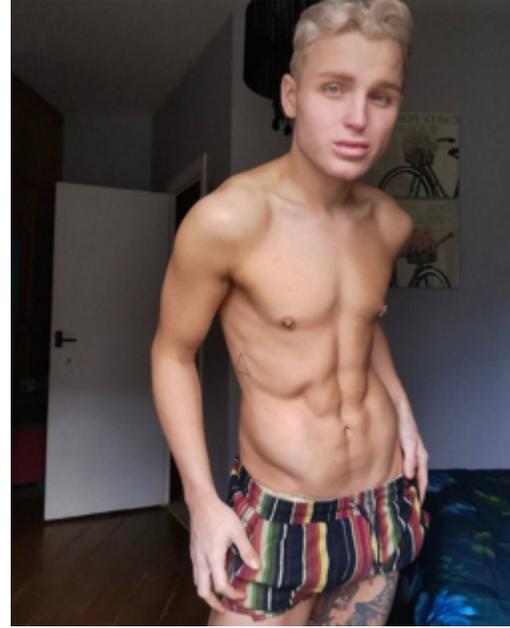


Figure: 28: @ethan\_johnson Instagram profile (Ethan Johnson, n.d.).



**Figure 29:** *Proper crimbo* 🤪 (Ethan Johnson, 2020).



**Figure 30:** *HAPPY NEW YEAR Swipe for a smile what's your resolution?* (Ethan Johnson, 2021).

The quest for the ideal body seems to be a key principle of the metropolitan gay male subculture (Sinfield, 1998; Mowlabocus, 2016) in which, I would surmise from findings within this study, Instagay culture is embedded. Amico (2001) argues that the idealised male body is fetishised within gay communities and is evident in visual media which idolises the ideal male physique. This further supports the idea that Instagays use their bodies as a commodity online and explains their popularity on the social media platform of Instagram as it relies on visual media posts. As previously stated, Albury (2015) conducted a survey with participants who discussed their perceptions of other social media users who exhibit their bodies online, masking their shirtless selfie posts as being about something else by adding an unrelated caption (see figure 14). This is evidenced through two of Johnson's social media posts (see figures 29–30). Johnson is seen shirtless in one post which has a caption related to Christmas and the second post with a caption relating to the New Year. However, neither of these social media posts relate to either of these festivities. Blum and Osenlund (2019) comment on the Instagay aesthetic, stating that the popularity of such accounts is due to the evolution of Instagram:

Sure, it's easy to make fun of the Instagays' shirtless-leaning-on-a-bannister-aesthetic, but for reasons that probably have to do with the way Instagram evolved, that's just what sells

these days. And if you're working to break into modelling, acting, and directing, you as might as well have some fun along the way. (Blum and Osenlund, 2019)

During the photographic portraiture sessions conducted for this study, the participants all stated that the more skin they displayed and less clothing they wore, the higher their likes, follows and engagement on their profiles: "Oh, I'm guilty of posting thirst traps! We all like to know we're desirable to others and it's a nice confidence boost. So, why not?" (J. Leech, personal communication, February 7, 2020). Male health journalist Zachary Zane (2020) explains a thirst trap to be a photograph posted on social media for attention, usually associated with a person's desirable physique and minimal clothing. A thirst trap is essentially the same as the shirtless selfie (Kathy, 2015) as both focus the aesthetic and appeal around sexualising the individual's body for attention and validation. The repetition of the same aesthetic is common on Instagay accounts; a large portion of such accounts contain photographs of users from similar vantage points, with similar surroundings (often taken within the home) and in many cases in near-identical poses within numerous posts (see figures 29–30). Instagays, as mentioned by participants during this study, learn from previous post engagement from followers as to which of their photographs are most popular. Although thirst traps or shirtless selfies are used as an aesthetic choice by Instagays, images depicting the body can also be observed, as Clarke (1997) states, as being less about the body and more about representation.

A factor of the Instagay aesthetic is the default sizing all Instagram images are compressed to: the default is a 1080x1080-pixel square, displayed on profiles in a grid format (Leaver et al., 2020). It is possible to post a larger image, but one side of the image will always be the default compression of 1080 pixels. This is the rationale for why the final portraits (see figures 1–4) selected to accompany this study are resized and formatted to 1080x1080 pixels to emulate the Instagram square aesthetic. Instagays construct an idealised fantasy online; as Handa (2011) questions, why follow accounts depicting the norm when users can willingly escape banal surroundings to invest in others they deem more interesting than themselves online? The fantasy is, however, just that: an online voyeuristic glimpse into the seemingly perfect life of another, not the full picture of the individual's life. The cost of maintaining and viewing these performances can have negative physiological and psychological effects on both Instagays and viewers, with rising cases of poor



**Figure 31:** *just got a package* (Jamie Morgan, 2020).

using the male body as a social commodity is not simply representation of the male body in general, but the likeness of the idealised male physique and the social status that is attached to owning such an idolised and idealised body: “Muscles are currency in the gay community” (E. Johnson, personal communication, January 16, 2019).

One might even say that deep down a disproportionate number of gay men struggle with low levels of self-esteem. We’re often good at smartening up the surface and making ourselves – and everything around us – look more attractive. This might explain why we’ve traditionally been over-represented in fashion, hairdressing and interior design to such an extent it has become a stereotype. So, it seems logical that so many of us have been seduced by the selection of reality-improving filters offered on Instagram. Juno, Perpetua, Mayfair; each offers us the opportunity to become better versions of ourselves. (Cain, 2015)

mental health (depression, anxiety, feelings of inferiority, eating disorders etc.) within online gay communities, all citing social media representation as the root cause (Kumar, 2020). Thus, social media fantasy has the potential for real-life harm on both the physical and mental wellbeing of social media users. Gay men are not dissimilar to other wider social media users who also willingly worship the idealised body, yet it is false (Ewing, 2000). The objective and focus of many Instagay accounts

However, Instagay accounts can act as positive new safe spaces for gay communities online away from physical spaces. Cain (2015) explains that gay men, while growing up within a heteronormative society, are made to feel like outsiders within society due to a lack of visible representation, and these lingering feelings of inadequacy can be attributed to the rooted desire to seek out a supportive community of strangers that can provide validation, which thanks to the invention of social media has progressed to online.

### 3.3 Instagram as a Safe Space Online?

Lucero (2017) (2017) undertook a study to explore the question: “Do social media provide safe spaces for multiply minoritized LGBTQ youth to express and explore issues and sexuality and gender?” (Lucero, 2017, p. 119). Although her study focuses on LGBTQ+ youths between the ages of 14 and 17, Lucero’s (2017) findings can be applied within this study due to the fact many gay men have grown up using online spaces. Social media is a tool easily accessible and implemented by the gay community to open channels of digital communication and interaction by reaching out to a range of likeminded individuals within safe spaces online where individuals feel secure (Lucero, 2017). This offers individuals the



Figure 32: 🏳️‍🌈👤 (Anthony Schiavo, 2020).

opportunity to construct an online identity that could potentially be slightly or drastically different from an individual’s offline identity (Lucero, 2017). This analysis from Lucero (2017) can be linked to the points explored by using Goffman’s Frontstage/Backstage (1956/1990) theory, explaining that an individual’s Frontstage or *public* performance alters depending on the space (in this case social media) and the intended or perceived audience (followers). Online spaces create a virtual barrier affording self-exploration as the user is less aware of the size and volume of their audience when simply presented as a numeric figure and “invisible audience” (Lucero, 2017, p.

125). Over 68% of participants within Lucero's (2017) study stated they are more comfortable communicating through social media **as** opposed to offline communications, with participants referencing the safety it afforded them (Lucero, 2017). Through the findings of Campbell (2004), Mowlabocus (2016), Lucero (2017) and Cassidy (2020), it can be surmised that online spaces are used and frequented by gay users to meet and communicate with other members of the community.

The possibilities arise online for written abuse; however, social media platforms like Instagram offer users protection by being able to remove comments and, if necessary, block abusive users, which is not possible within a physical space where physical harm is possible compared to the distance online affords (Leaver et al., 2020). Thus, offline social interactions are less safe and can often lead to possible physical or verbal altercations, resulting in potentially hostile environments for members of the LGBTQ+ community (Kosciw et al. cited in Lucero, 2017, p. 118). Virtual communities on social media can provide a safe alternative space where gay and LGBTQ+ individuals may express themselves "with an invisible audience, free from physical harm" (Lucero, 2017, p. 118). New Instagram users can begin following, liking, and engaging in content and thanks to Instagram's algorithm, users will be steered **to** other accounts to follow based on these previous interactions, viewing habits and data collected by Instagram (Leaver et al., 2020). Technology journalist Josh Constine states:

Instagram relies on machine learning based on your past behaviour to create a unique feed for everyone. Even if you follow the exact same accounts as someone else, you'll get a personalized feed based on how you interact with those accounts. (Constine, 2018)

This means the more **gay-based** accounts and content a user engages with online, the more prone Instagram's algorithm is to suggest other accounts from similar content creators (gay men); therefore, it narrows down suggestions and personalised feeds until accounts such as Instagays become visible, **comprising** an almost exclusively gay audience. Since the formative years of internet interaction, it has been documented both culturally and academically that online spaces made and created by LGBTQ+ communities are a fundamental necessity in the daily lives of young gay men (Cassidy, 2020). One reason online spaces for gay communities are a necessity is to potentially escape the rise in hate crime which is predominantly (but not always) aimed at gay men

(Hunte, 2020). Cases of homophobic attacks and hate crime within the UK had almost trebled from 6,655 cases in 2014–2015 to 18,465 in 2019–2020 (Hunte, 2020). However, a large portion of homophobic attacks and hate crimes go unreported due to fear of a repeat attack and not being believed by authorities (Hunte, 2020). **Since** the start of 2014 to 2020, there has been a 20% rise in reports of hate crime targeting gay men, but many LGBTQ+ charities confirmed this was merely a fraction of cases (Hunte, 2020). Such figures validate the importance of online safe **spaces** for gay men as it appears reality is becoming an increasingly more dangerous environment. **But what** does the idea and act of **being** *safe* mean? Put simply, it is not merely discussing safety in the obvious sense of safety from harm, but also includes physical, psychological and community safety. Hillier et al.'s (2001) report on the importance of online spaces for the LGBTQ+ community discusses that the internet nurtures individuals' need for social interaction and communication safely when these needs are currently being neglected or may be potentially dangerous in face-to-face interactions.

Many gay men can relate to the importance of social media as a safe space for gay identity and expression. All participants photographed for this study communicated first-hand how Instagram and the sense of community created online, at times, has boosted their self-confidence and allowed them to experiment with their gay identity safely. However, all participants also contradicted this during personal communication by reluctantly admitting that social media does negatively affect them at times due to comparing their appearance and bodies to others online. This comes back to Ewing's (2000) point that the obsession of viewing the idealised and idolised body can create anxieties and insecurities within a viewer surrounding their own appearance and physical shortcomings. Oliver (2019) believes the popularity of Instagay accounts has spiked the rise in eating disorders and body dysmorphia. Poor mental health within the gay community is at an all-time high with 86% of **gay men** at some point experiencing mental health issues (Leon, 2017). This can potentially be attributed to the narcissistic need for validation online embedded within the Instagay phenomenon and the feelings of inferiority cited **by** viewers if they do not match the gay communities' hierarchy of unrealistic and often unhealthy body standards (Oliver, 2019; Kumar, 2020). "Gay males are thought to only represent 5% of the total male population but among males who have eating disorders, 42% identify as gay" (National Eating Disorders Association, 2018).

The evidence shows that the use and oversaturation of the idealised male body online is dangerous to the wellbeing of gay communities (Oliver, 2019; Kumar, 2020); however, the communities cannot blame these issues exclusively on Instagay accounts and the men behind them. No one has the authority to judge someone else for their life choices in real life or online, nor the way in which they choose to celebrate their bodies (Oliver, 2019). This is the catalyst for feelings of self-doubt, self-loathing and feelings of inferiority online, and this responsibility therefore lies with viewers as opposed to Instagays. This is further articulated by Oliver (2019): “Following these accounts is like looking at a train wreck: I can’t look away”. We are unable to control others’ actions and behaviour; the only actions we can control are our own and if following Instagay accounts has a negative effect on an individual, it is that individual’s responsibility to recognise this and hit the unfollow button (Oliver, 2019).

From this photographic study conducted using portraiture photography, personal interactions with participants, and using Instagram, it has been revealed that, yes, online spaces offer freedom of expression and safety as a gay refuge. However, as researched and explored during this study, the online space is not free from the politics and prejudice of the physical world. As evidenced, the use of idealised representation and the complexities of this visual form online have had a negative impact on gay men and their own mental wellbeing and body image (Kumar, 2020). This is supported by Ewing (2000), who states that viewing such visual material can incite obsession and anxieties within a viewer regarding their own appearance in comparison to others deemed as superior. Thus, the primary content created and posted for mass consumption on spaces, such as Instagram, for gay communities are idealised depictions and an online performance, not an authentic representation of reality. This is supported by the findings of Mercer (2003), who explains that the ideal is a fantasy and therefore not achievable.

## Conclusion

This study has endeavoured to explore and understand the complexities of Instagram as an aspirational and potential safe space for gay men. While agreeing with previous research surrounding online spaces and investigations into their usage by gay communities, this research questioned the “unsafe” complexities of Instagram due to visual depictions surrounding the idealised male body online and the politics behind Instagay visual culture when placed within the traditions and conventions of gay iconography and photography. The study was supported by prior research from Shaw (1997), Hillier et al. (2001), Campbell (2004), Mowlabocus (2016), Lucero (2017) and Cassidy (2020), who have all explored the role digital spaces play in the lives of gay men and the wider LGBTQ+ community. Methods of practical research used within the study included photographic portraiture and personal communication with Instagays within their homes and online via Instagram which were further supported by critical reflection of these methods. The mechanics and complexities of online spaces used by gay men to facilitate safe expression and visibility as a valuable addition to their daily lives has already been discussed by the aforementioned researchers and academics. This study began with the desire to explore Instagram as a potential safe space for gay men which was influenced by my own personal identity in being part of the gay community; however, the research has highlighted that neither physical nor online spaces are entirely safe.

The meaning of the term “safe space” explored within this study was used to examine and understand the gay communities need and longing for safe spaces. This study endeavoured to discuss the complexities, value and community politics of safe spaces (physical and digital) for gay men. The continued aspiration from within gay communities to use and create physical safe spaces, such as gay clubs, gay villages and the home, is explained by Hughes (2002), Gorman-Murray (2007) and Held (2014). This is due to the communities' desire to find alternative spaces that hold significant value as spaces of assumed safe gay expression away from potential physical harm and the heteronormative expectations of society. The dangers associated with physical spaces (Jamieson, 2017; Francis, 2020; Hunte, 2020) meant gay communities began looking for alternative spaces for safe interaction, one of which was digital spaces. However, online spaces cannot guarantee safety. One example of Instagram's complexities as an online space used by gay men is the potential effect that the aesthetic and visual language surrounding the iconography of

the male body online can have on the mental wellbeing of viewers and Instagays alike, as explored and supported throughout the study by findings from Oliver (2019), Kumar (2020) and Pachankis et al. (2020) and personal communication conducted with Instagays first-hand. Therefore, online spaces, as previously examined by the aforementioned researchers and journalists, can potentially undermine mental wellbeing. However, in physical spaces, as identified by Crockett (2016), Hanhardt (2016) and Jamieson (2017), this is replaced by the potential of physical harm. This highlights the fact that online spaces, like physical spaces, have limitations surrounding safety. Thus, the safety and security gay communities seek from assumed safe spaces, both physical and digital, is purely aspirational due to the examined complexities.

During the early stages of the research, photographic portraiture was introduced to investigate the complexities of Instagram as a possible safe space for gay men. It was also introduced to explore the potential of a safe pictorial space which offered an alternative form of representation for Instagays away from the idealised and sexualised Instagram persona, photographing a potentially more genuine depiction of them within their home, away from their social media performance and online followers. However, through case study research and applying Goffman's Frontstage/Backstage theory (1956/1990), this study has shown that portraiture cannot offer an authentic pictorial safe space due to the staged nature of the genre, resulting in a performance from the sitter for the camera and the assumed audience it represents. Photographic portraiture is a medium used to capture a sitter's likeness; however, a true representation cannot be captured within such a contrived setting where assumptions of portraiture representing legitimacy are subverted due to staging, regardless of the location. However, these findings show that the home has become an extension of Instagram as a backdrop for social media posts, inviting viewers and possible surveillance into the home due to glimpses into this previously assumed private space online.

This study focused specifically on Instagram as an online space and used photographic portraiture and personal communication with participants to examine and explore links between the Instagay phenomenon, gay iconography and gay representation centred around the idealised body and social performance online. The practice of photographic portraiture contributed to the investigation surrounding the complexities of Instagram as an online space used by gay men by making visual

based research that could be displayed either online (website, social media etc.) or offline (exhibition, book etc.), which adds a new contribution to the research topic. It has the potential to encourage and open conversations to a wider audience than theoretic research on its own, due to the accessibility of photography as a visual medium. As evidenced by the findings of Leaver et al. (2020), in recent years, social media has become increasingly visual based. Therefore, the photographic portraits created alongside this study will help a wider non-academic audience to see, engage in and potentially contribute to the discussion surrounding gay male engagement and use of online spaces, gay representation online, the use of iconography surrounding the male body adopted by gay subculture, and the Instagay phenomenon and its complexities.

This research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite initially managing to visit some participants, the introduction of social distancing measures in March 2020 meant meeting more Instagays and entering their homes became an impossibility and presented itself as a limitation within the study. Thus, the photographic aspect of the study was not explored to its full potential. However, from this limitation, the study shifted focus to Instagram as a research tool, examining and investigating its complexities and use as an online space for gay interaction away from the physical space, and how historic gay representation and iconography surrounding the idealised male body is adopted by Instagays online. The connectivity of social media as a digital space of alternative interaction and communication became fundamental during the COVID-19 pandemic, during the time of this study. Many physical spaces closed for public safety, meaning physical spaces used by gay communities to meet were no longer accessible. Further highlighting the importance of online spaces, which became the only means for many individuals and communities to interact. This potentially calls into question the need for physical safe spaces in the future, which could become redundant as the use and popularity of online interaction increases.

Instagays rely on viewers to nurture their possible narcissistic tendencies through validation of the idealised representation they perpetuate online; thus, viewers and Instagays alike indulge in the fantasy of the online space as a form of escapism and refuge from the male heteronormative ideals of society and the banality of reality. However, poor mental health and negativity within gay communities incited by social media cannot be ignored when discussing Instagram and its complexities as a space for gay men to interact, thus confirming that online spaces are not fully

safe from community politics, prejudice and struggles surrounding the desire to have an ideal body versus the mortal reality. As Pachankis et al. (2020), Oliver (2019) and Kumar (2020) evidence, gay men feel the most social pressure from within their own community, surrounded by idealised body expectations and social hierarchy. The aforementioned researchers and journalists argue that the rise in poor mental health and lack of body confidence is a direct result of the Instagay phenomenon. However, social media platforms, such as Instagram, are presented to the masses freely; therefore, users of social media must take accountability for their online viewing habits. It is inappropriate for society to place emphasis solely on Instagay accounts for poor mental wellbeing surrounding body image and representation within gay communities online as no individual is forced to follow or engage with it. If an individual feels that certain social media accounts are having a negative mental effect on them, they can choose to unfollow (Oliver, 2019).

Instagram, as this study has identified, has more social and community value than assumed when beginning the study. This could be further investigated and applied to other areas of study, as gay men are not the only individuals within the LGBTQ+ community that seek alternative spaces for community interaction. One of the benefits of the online space is that abuse can be easily ignored, deleted and blocked; this is not true of real-life encounters which can result in LGBTQ+ members being subjected to uncomfortable and potentially harmful encounters within heteronormative society. Further research could explore the use of other social media platforms used by gay communities as alternative spaces, such as Facebook, Tumblr, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter and OnlyFans to name a few and the mechanics of use each offer. This shows that the research potential for this study was only tentatively explored compared to its wider potential due to the range of spaces and social interactions present within gay communities online. An example of such is the recent establishment of safe online sex work being conducted within the LGBTQ+ community through the platform of OnlyFans and the protection it offers, removing the physical dangers associated with sex work (Bernstein, 2019).

Both physical and digital examples of stereotypical gay spaces and their complexities examined within this study have allowed for the conclusion to be made that these spaces are in fact not free from their own dangers. They are not wholly “safe” spaces, and have never been safe, despite the gay communities’ aspirational desire to create such spaces for feelings of community and safety.

The sense of community and connectivity present within online spaces that act as places for gay men to interact, and the feelings of empowerment they bring through visibility and sexual identity, is real as evidenced by Hillier et al. (2001) and Lucero (2017). However, the desire from within gay communities to create alternative safe spaces is juxtaposed with the idealised and idolised photography of the Instagay phenomenon. Gay iconography and gay representation centred around the idealised body and social performance online for visibility, likes, comments and follows etc. in these online activities and interactions may contradict and undermine the communities' aspiration of safety online.

As discussed throughout this study, one of the complexities of Instagram is the negative connotations of narcissism. For example, depictions of the idealised male body used as a visual commodity for popularity and validation within the gay subculture hierarchy (Amico, 2001; Mowlabocus, 2016) and the effect they have on both viewers and Instagays alike cannot be ignored. Despite this, Instagram use within gay communities is showing no sign of disappearing (Cain, 2015). Therefore, the complexities and community politics present within online spaces and the ways such spaces are used within gay subculture are yet to be fully explored due to the ever-changing online landscape. Future research in this field may need to rethink the notions of "safe spaces", particularly as we see these familiar but somehow new technological developments of digital spaces emerging and seamlessly merging into mainstream culture and daily life.



**Figure 33:** *Ethan* (James Richards, 2019).

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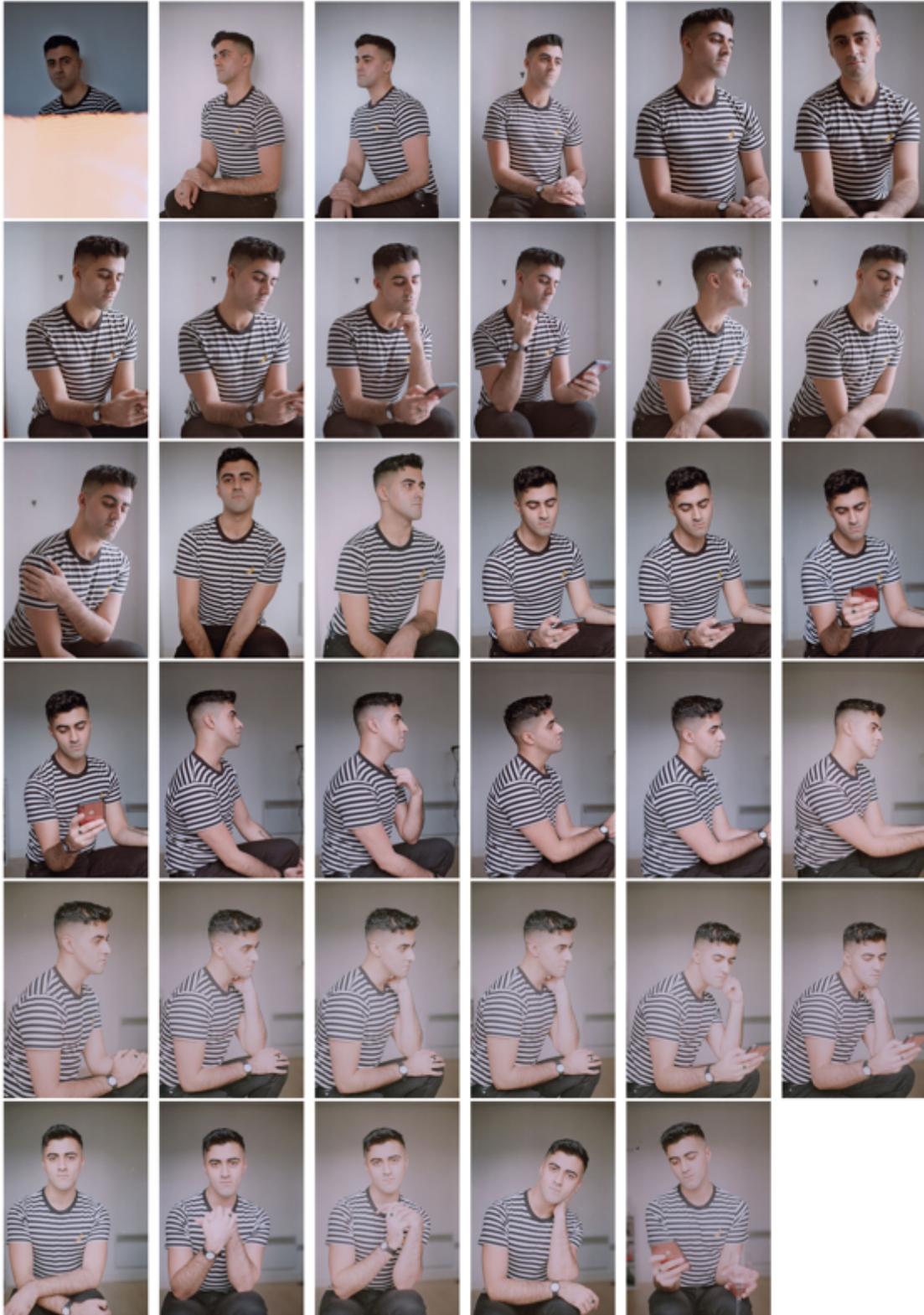
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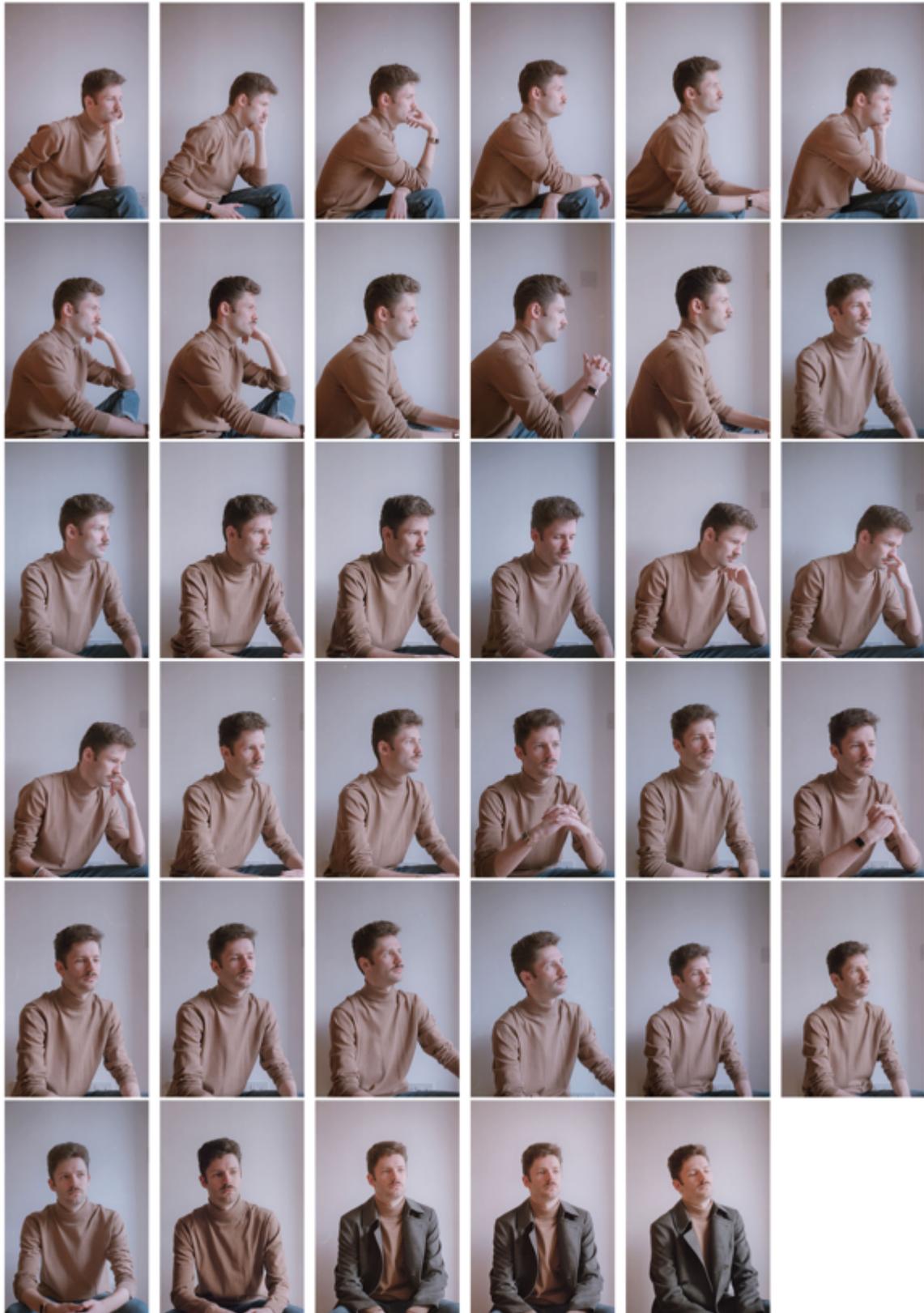
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## Appendices

- **Appendix 1: Javed on 35mm Film (Contact sheet).**



- **Appendix 2: Jay on 35mm Film (Contact sheet).**



- **Appendix 3: Matt on 35mm Film (Contact sheet).**



- **Appendix 4: Ethan on 35mm Film (Contact sheet).**



- **Appendix 5:** Ethan: Revisited on 35mm Film (Contact sheet).



- **Appendix 6:** Ethan: Revisited on 35mm Film (Contact sheet).



- **Appendix 7: Anthony on 35mm Film (Contact sheet).**



- **Appendix 8: Jacob on 35mm Film (Contact sheet).**



• **Appendix 9: Jamie on 35mm Film (Contact sheet).**



- **Appendix 10:** Polaroid Contact Sheet (Taken by participants with Polaroid or Instax camera containing a single polaroid).

