

This Instagram account became wildly popular for its queer personal ads — and now it’s a dating app

By [Anying Guo](#)

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Sula Malina sculpted a personal ad for more than a month, fine-tuning the description to be simultaneously clever, accurate and less than 100 words. Essentially, it had to be perfect.

Me: 22, transmasculine femme NB libra with a penchant for aggressive femmes. Radically vulnerable, goofy, blushing, boob-less beatboxer. Too easily wifed up but working on it. You: consumer of fragrant hair products, soft on the inside, believer in ghosts & bell hooks’ definition of love.

Washington, DC

In August 2018, the ad was posted to the Instagram account [Personals](#), known for posting such ads by and for the queer community. Malina, who uses they/them pronouns, had recently gotten out of an open relationship and was seeking monogamy.

Though they had labored over the ad, Malina felt little intimidation in sending their romantic wants and needs into the Internet ether, because they knew the queer community was going to be on the other end. And if no dates had come out of their ad, Malina still feels like it would have been “a great experience.” But the first person they started talking to is their current partner, who successfully fulfilled Malina’s “believer in ghosts” requirement with an offer of a ghost tour.

After starting in 2017, [Personals](#) became a hugely popular place for people like Malina to meet a partner or to make a friend, attracting more than 60,000 followers. Last month, founder Kells Rakowski took the next step of turning it into its own app, [Lex](#), creating a rare queer-centric platform for romance and friendship.

The Instagram account began with one spontaneous screenshot. Rakowski, a graphic designer in New York City, discovered an online archive of print personal ads from [On Our Backs](#), a women-run erotica magazine in circulation from 1984 to 2006. She posted a screenshot of them on her lesbian history Instagram account, [@h_e_r_s_t_o_r_y](#), and instantly her followers clamored for more. In her bio, Rakowski threw up a Google Doc link for people to create their own ads, and quickly realized the reaction warranted an entirely new account.

[Personals](#) specifically catered to the LBTQA of the LGBTQ community (essentially, everyone in the community but cisgender gay men, a group better represented in the world of LGBTQ dating apps). People submitted ads summing up themselves and their desires (like “softie 4 softie,” a request for a partner as sentimental as the poster), touching upon personality quirks, preferences for friendship or romance (or both) and sometimes a promise of an idyllic first date.

Rakowski found that the community was not only frustrated with dating apps, but also lacked a more general digital

space to connect with one another. Mainstream dating apps don't often prioritize LGBTQIA inclusion. (Tinder only recently expanded its gender identity offerings.) Many Personals fans felt its creation was long overdue, particularly on Instagram, where Rakowski found queer people were already converging in more subtle ways.



lex.app
84.6K followers

[View profile](#)

THEM 4 FEMME

Soft Latinx theythem libra
giving this one more shot.
If you're a femme that
believes kindness is hot,
into monogamy, PDA, getting
lost in the feels, love
dancing & prancing in queer
spaces, enjoy a gin & soda
or a cold brew, into local
drag...& want to have
spontaneous outings after
a long day at work,
pls come find me.
@Iamdesx
Brooklyn, NY

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351 likes

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“The kind of revolutionary thing about Personals was that it was 100 percent queer people looking for other queer people,” says recent Bryn Mawr graduate Shira Steinberg, who met their Pittsburgh-based partner on the account, later moving to the city to be closer to them. “It wasn’t, like, a straight couple wanting a third or a straight person wanting a gay friend.”

Before discovering Personals, both Steinberg and Malina were exhausted by the number of Tinder or Hinge messages they received that reduced them to a stereotype. Personals’ lack of images meant their interests, energy and personality were prioritized over physical appearance.

“It’s not fun to go on first dates and discovering people want something else that you don’t offer,” says Malina, who found their androgynous, masculine-presenting appearance gave dates an expectation that they were going to act a certain way or “be their boyfriend.”

The Columbia University graduate student was initially attracted to the platform because they had seen a friend get a lot of digital attention from an ad (“And I really like likes and attention!”) but soon discovered Personals’ unique ability to seemingly unite the entire queer community in one corner of the Internet.

“Even drafting my own personals ad, I knew that people from many different perspectives were going to read this,” says Malina, who loved scrolling past ads based anywhere from Australia to Canada. “You have to be very conscious of language.”

The ads had a minimalist aesthetic, which Rakowski says made the posts easy to read yet “contemporary and cool.” They spilled out on alternating electric teal and white tiles, with the occasional yellow one indicating a “missed connection” post about a stranger someone recently encountered (a nod to another old-school form of romantic longing, if you consider Craigslist old.)

Language was another key component to why Personals worked; the short and charming descriptions could ask for cuddling in the same breath as sexual domination. Plus, the LGBTQ community has historically used words such as butch, transfemme, genderfluid and switch as identifiers, indicating sexual preferences, gender identity and more. And on Personals, where posters had to squeeze their personalities into packed ad descriptions, these words helped concisely show who they are.

But sometimes the language could cause controversy. Malina remembers seeing a post containing the word “boi,” and the subsequent backlash questioned whether the white person who posted the ad could describe themselves using a word that originated in the African American community.

Such disputes could create a learning experience for some, but for others, it felt like a burden of labor to dispense that knowledge, Malina noticed. They fit into a larger conversation about the white privilege that dominates many queer spaces. With the creation of the app version, Lex, Rakowski and her newly hired five-person team hope to better recognize these issues and rely less on members of the community to call out inequity.

Rakowski started Lex after realizing that the community had outgrown Personals, which had racked up a couple of thousand posts. “People were submitting personal ads all day long,” says Rakowski, who also didn’t like feeling bound to the “Facebook/Instagram megaplex.”

Lex (short for lexicon, a playful wink to the queer community’s unique vernacular) was financed by a Kickstarter campaign that raised almost \$50,000. The profiles look similar to those on Personals — minimalist, no photos — but users can message privately and set geographic boundaries.

Malina was excited to start using Lex to remain part of that Personals community, but asked their partner if it was okay to download it. “The benefit of Instagram was that people who didn’t want to directly interact with anybody could kind of just see it happen,” says Malina. “Downloading an app feels like a step towards looking for something. ... It definitely feels like more of a commitment.”

But for Malina, Rakowski and others, the benefits of Lex outweigh any doubts. On Lex, there is less risk of trolls storming the comment section, faster ad posting and more opportunity to meet people in your area. Vogue reported two weeks after the launch date that there had been around 12,000 downloads.

Rakowski finds that Personals, and now Lex, have offered a place for all types of queer connections. Personals followers in Britain met up to watch “The Great British Bake Off,” for instance, and soon became their own LGBTQA collective called Queerpack London. Rakowski says the community attracts unexpected subgroups: older people in long-term monogamous relationships wanting to be entertained and kept up-to-date; bisexual people in straight-passing relationships seeking queer friends; and those who are exploring their sexuality, reading ads to learn more about the community and, ultimately, themselves.

“I want it to be a place that people feel safe and unfettered by cis men,” says Rakowski. “I just want a place that can live online and be healthy and thoughtful, not superficial and looks-based. Hopefully, also bringing people together offline. That’s the whole point.”

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[A queer user’s guide to the wild and terrifying world of LGBTQ dating apps](#)

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Grindr was the first big dating app for gay men. Now it's falling out of favor.

