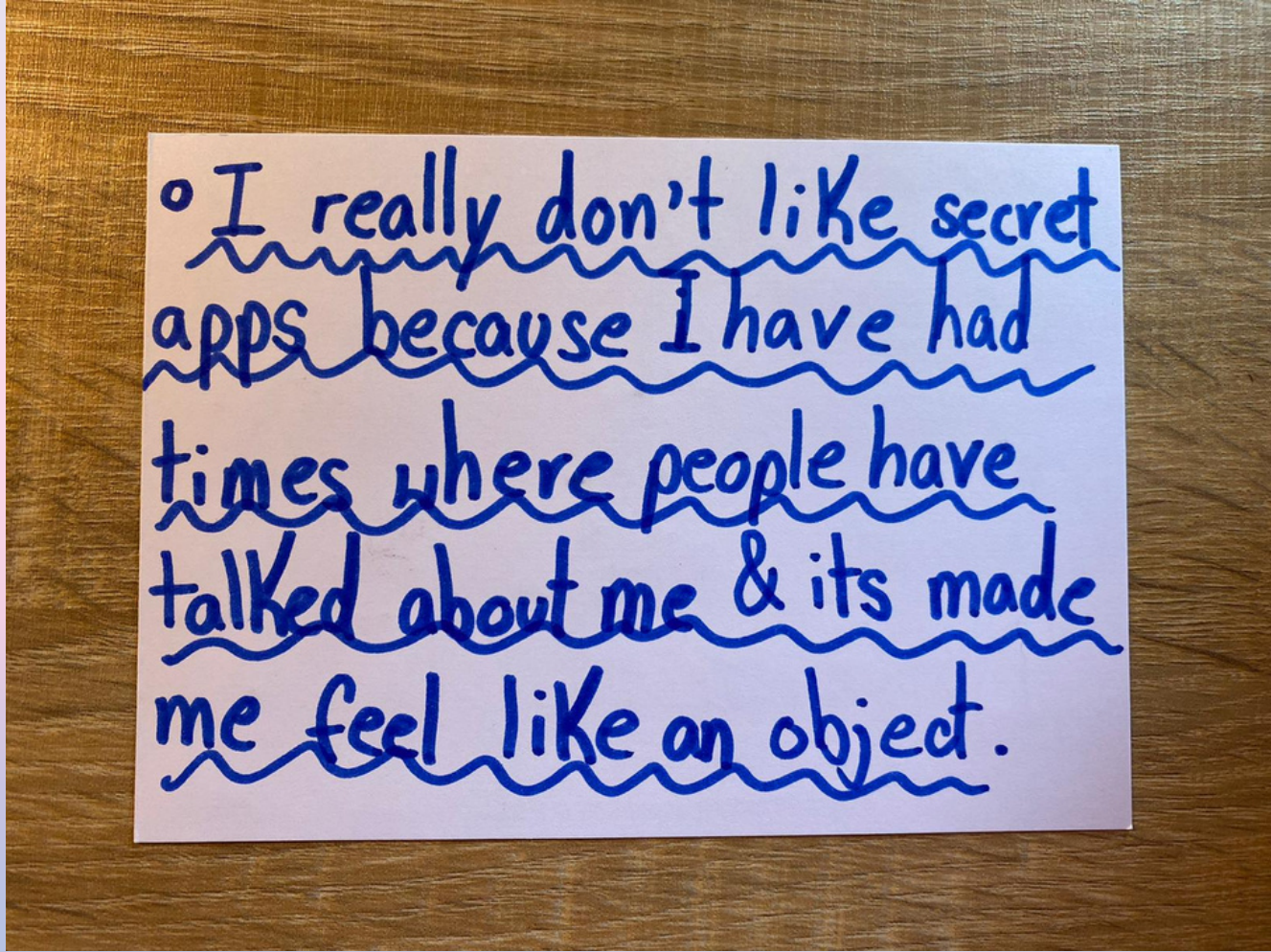


The Challenges of Content Moderation: A Case Study of Anonymous Apps

My Research

- **2018 – 2022** British Academy Small Grant, asking how teens feel about anonymous apps
- Interviews + workshops:
 - 36 teens aged 13–18
 - 4 "adults"
 - 200+ art projects
 - Mixed gender, school type, ethnicity, religion



◦ I really don't like secret apps because I have had times where people have talked about me & its made me feel like an object.

What is an anonymous app?

1

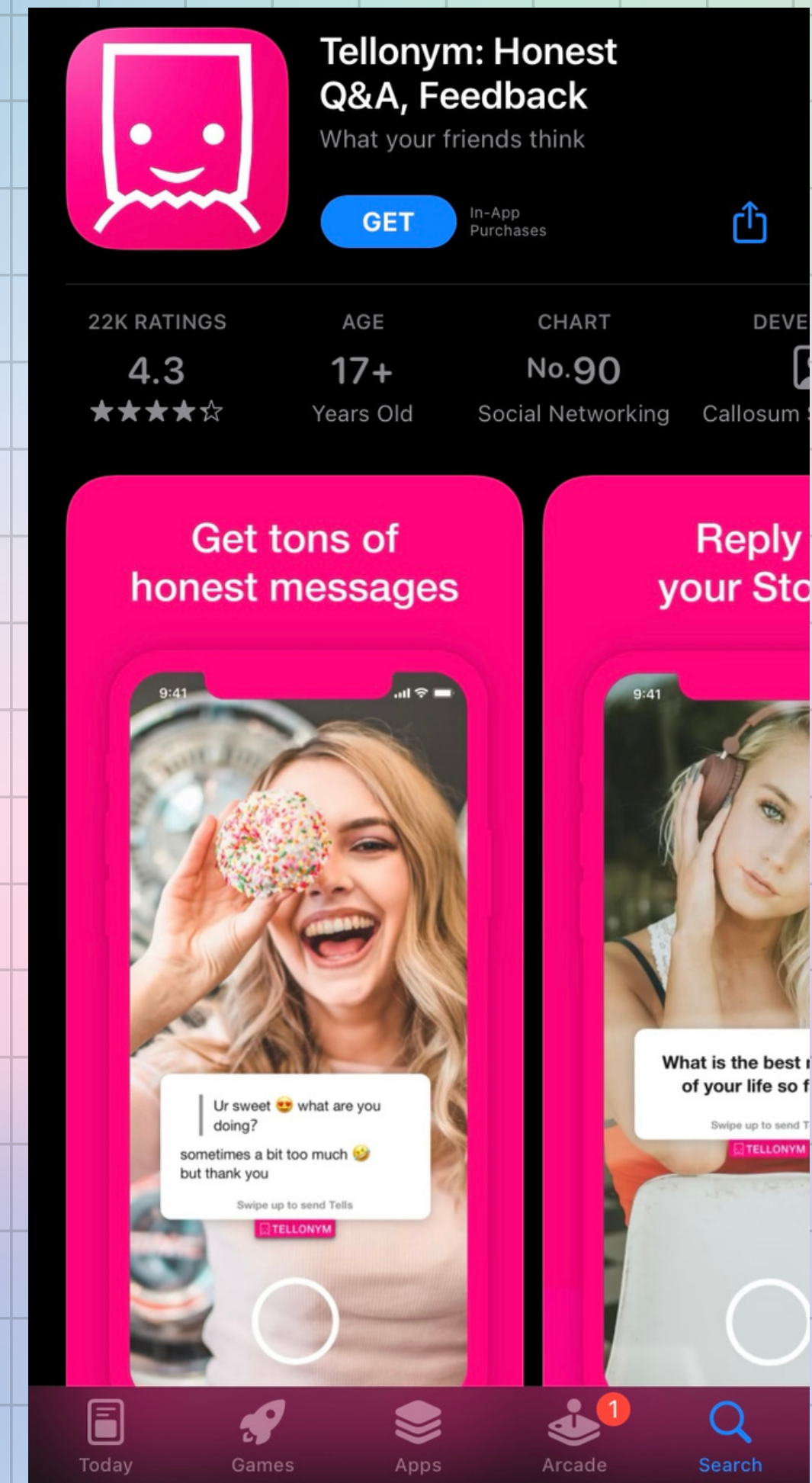
They let you send anonymous messages to other app users, and either work according to your **location** or your **networks** (Ma et al, 2017)

2

There are **sub-genres** of anonymous apps: feedback, Q&A, confessionals/secret-telling, meeting strangers, and others

3

They are **under-studied** academically, even though user numbers often rival the big players (Sharon and John, 2018)



Sub-Genre Name	Example App	Sub-Genre Description
Secret-telling apps ²²	Whisper	Secret-telling apps emphasise telling secrets or confessing to something, usually to an audience of known individuals but sometimes to total strangers. These apps want you to reveal hidden things about yourself and the people you know, as opposed to simply communicating without a trace.
Feedback and Q&A apps	Tellonym	Feedback and/or Q&A apps are usually connected to 'mainstream' social apps. You use them to ask a question to a known audience and receive their anonymous answers. Some apps frame this as asking for 'feedback' on something about yourself, typically your personality or appearance. You usually receive responses from people you know but won't be told exactly who it was.
Gossip apps	YikYak	Some anonymous apps offer what I call <i>localised</i> anonymity: where users are linked together by their affiliation, usually a school or university, and are verified by signing up with their institutional email address. Apps like this – which often display a feed of posts from anonymised people within your network – are perfect for spreading gossip about known individuals. While these are not typically marketed as 'gossip apps', I use this phrase because this is often how they are known among users.
Social apps	Fling	Some anonymous apps connect you to complete strangers, enabling you to expand your social network. These apps often allow video and/or image sharing and work by randomisation (connecting you to a specific person in a seemingly 'random' way).

(Table 2: anonymous app sub-genre information).

(Gerrard, **forthcoming**)

Talking Points

○ ○ ○ ○

1

"Popularity by surprise": the lifecycle of anonymous apps

2

Why are anonymous apps so popular?

3

Why do anonymous apps fail?

"Popular by surprise"



1

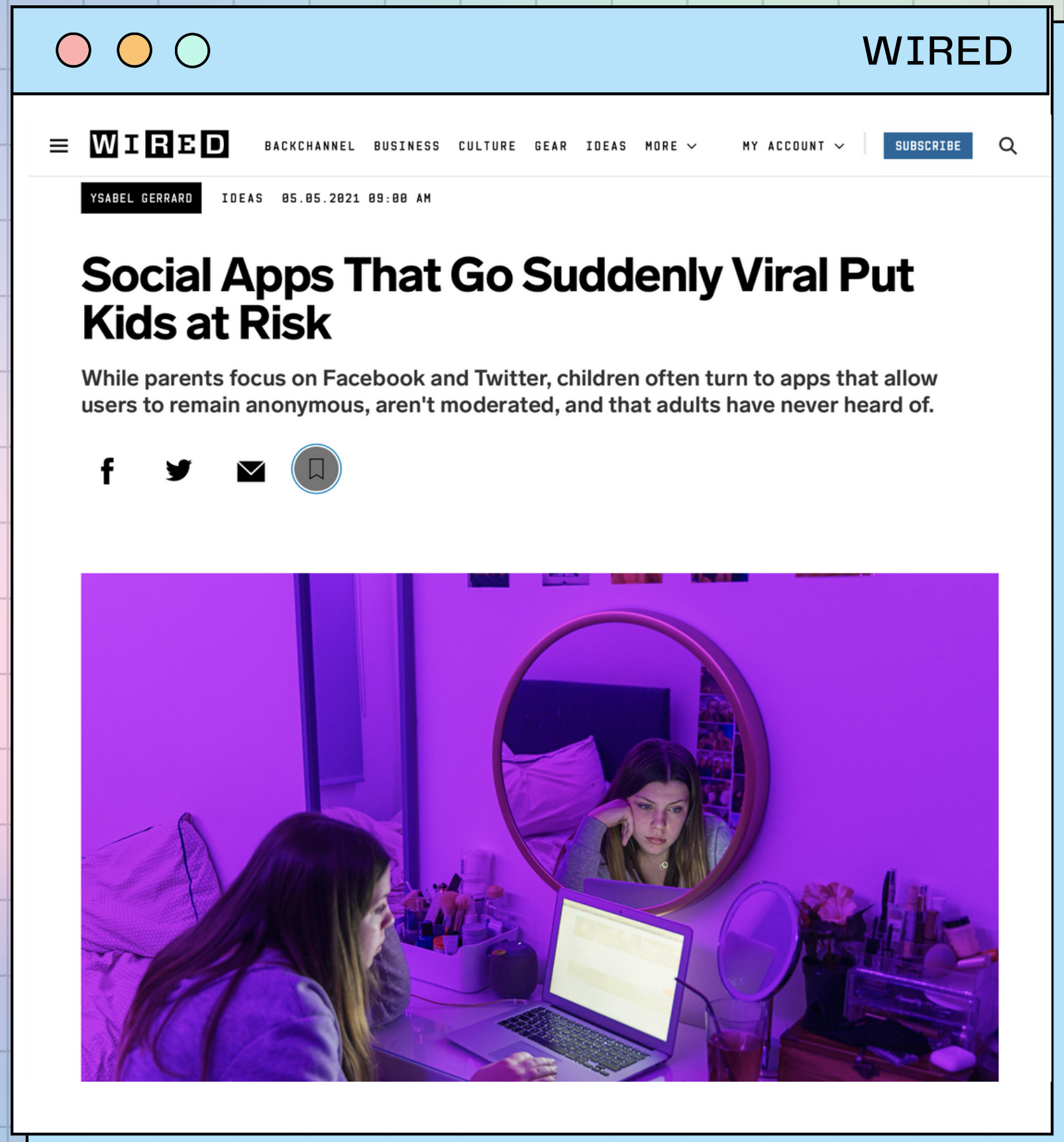
Anonymous apps tend to become **unexpectedly popular**, making it tough to keep on top of the most popular ones

2

They are victims of their own success, **sharply rising and falling in popularity**, often becoming too dangerous and being removed from app stores

3

But this trend is ironically what makes them so **appealing**, particularly to teens, known for being open to trying new apps and joining their friends



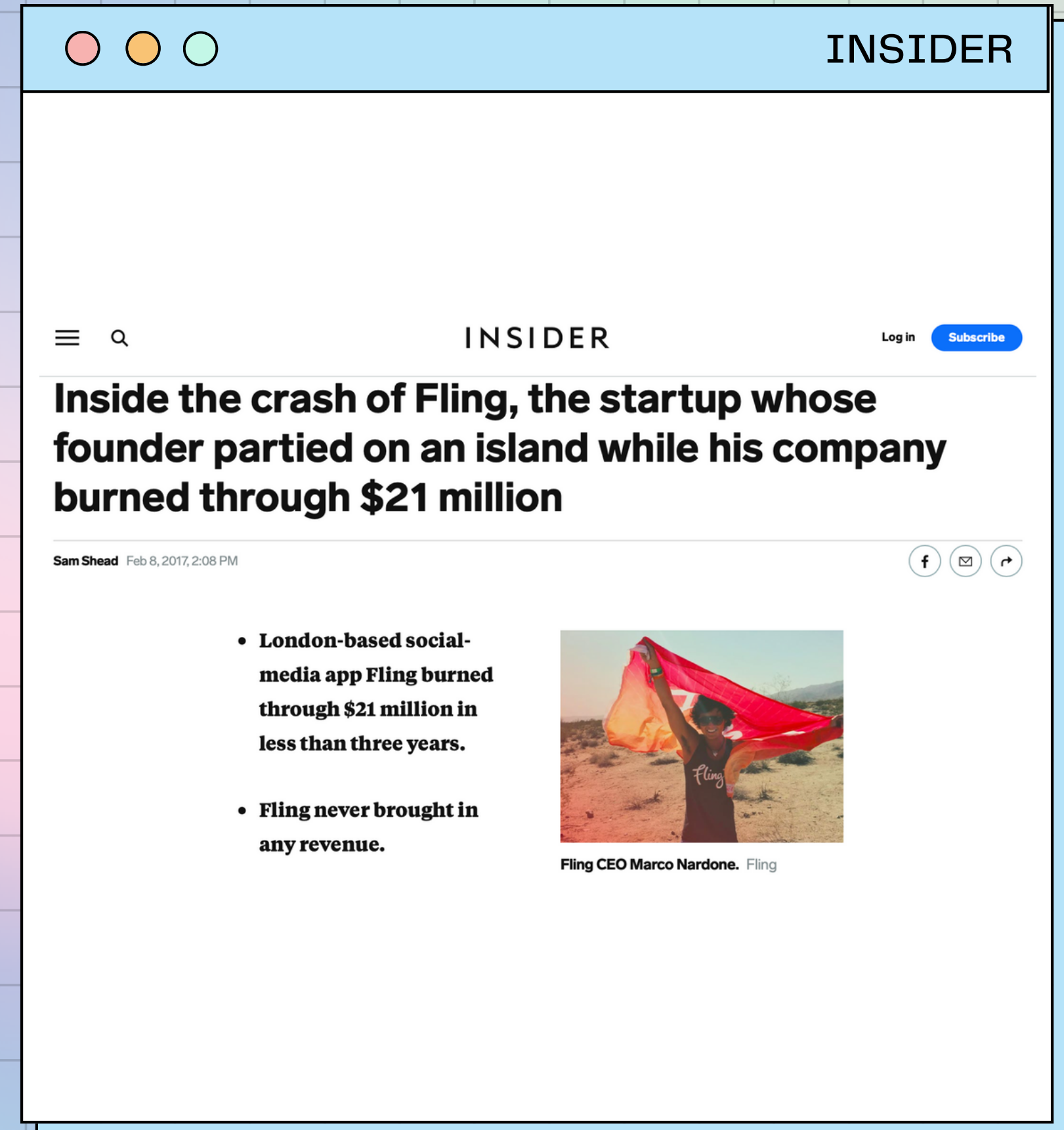
Why are anonymous apps so popular? ○ ○ ○ ○

- 1 They enable **identity exploration**
- 2 They are mechanisms to evade **stigma**
- 3 They aren't as **public-facing** as other social platforms



Why do anonymous apps fail?

- 1 They attract **bullying** behaviours
- 2 They are used for **gossip** and rumour-spreading and are used to make appearance-based insults
- 3 They become very popular, very fast



Anonymity (+ pseudonymity) **tremendously valuable** for teens (van der Nagel, various). While they have mixed experiences on the apps, they feel safer online when using a "nickname" (response to "stranger danger" discourse).

Anonymity itself does not make anonymous apps unsafe. Instead, it's the **failures of content moderation**.



UK Government + Parliament

Closed petition

Make verified ID a requirement for opening a social media account.

Make it a legal requirement when opening a new social media account, to provide a verified form of ID. Where the account belongs to a person under the age of 18 verify the account with the ID of a parent/guardian, to prevent anonymised harmful activity, providing traceability if an offence occurs.

[More details](#)

This petition is closed

All petitions run for 6 months

696,985 signatures

This is a common origin and downfall story for many social media startups: platforms like Fling and Sarahah **do not collapse because they are unpopular, but because they are too popular**, leaving their founders **unprepared** for the necessary scale of content moderation. And yet anonymity often takes the blame...

- Anonymous apps urgently need to be included in the "online harms"/children's safety conversation, alongside the Big Players. We do not know enough about the apps' roles in children's lives, despite their tremendous popularity.
- Anonymous apps remind us that content moderation involves a profound trade-off between automated and human moderation: it cannot be fully automated, and nor do all companies – especially startups – have the resources to rely on human moderation. So where does this leave us?
- Anonymous apps remind us that social apps that become rapidly popular have different responsibilities (in terms of content moderation) than established players in the tech scene.



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Expanding the debate about content moderation: scholarly research agendas for the coming policy debates

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Anonymity

It's hard to miss ongoing, often polarised debates about the promises and perils of online anonymity. Does anonymity embolden people to abuse others or allow truer self-expression? Does it encourage deception or make people feel safer? These are complex questions without clear answers.

Online anonymity can take many forms, from pseudonyms that conceal “real” identities to private browsers or VPNs that allow users to be “untraceable.” There are also services designed specifically to grant users anonymity, known as “anonymous apps”.

Often conflated with privacy, true anonymity - the total absence of personally identifying information - is difficult to achieve in a digital environment where traces of ourselves are left every time we engage with a service. Anonymity is best considered on a continuum, ranging “from the totally anonymous to the thoroughly named”.

People have lots of reasons for being anonymous online. While anonymity affords a degree of protection to people like journalists, whistle-blowers and marginalised users, the lack of traceability that some types of anonymity offer may prevent people from being held accountable for their actions.

Anonymity brings about a complex mix of opportunities and risks. Below are eight examples of features that enable anonymity, common to many services popular among children.

Thank you for listening!

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