

# **Trans Identity Management Across Social Media Platforms**

By

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**ABSTRACT**

Trans people use social media for identity work, including for education on trans terms and resources, connecting with trans networks, and sharing and presenting their identities. This identity work takes place over time and across platforms. In this study, interviews were conducted with 13 trans and non-binary social media users to explore how they use different social media platforms in relation to their gender identity. Reinforcing prior research, I found that social media, and the trans networks found there, had a large impact on how participants understood and expressed their identities. Beyond that, I found social media users strategically and actively manage their social media use in relation to their trans identity by taking advantage of different platforms and accounts as well as curating their networks and content.

## INTRODUCTION

*“I think I’m much more authentically myself now than I would be if I didn’t have Twitter,”* P3 shared, the sentiment of which was reflected by many other participants. The Internet and social media have been revolutionary for trans<sup>1</sup> individuals, a safe space and a “source of personal and social liberation” (Scheuerman, Branham, & Hamidi, 2018, p.10). The Internet broadly, and social media specifically, have been spaces where trans people can build community, gain visibility, find resources, and participate in activism (Hill, 2005; Prinsloo, 2011; Cannon et al., 2017). Social media sites afford connection with people with shared identities, allowing trans people to connect with each other.

When using social media, people engage in identity and impression management (Krämer & Winter, 2008). Trans users, in particular, use social media to explore and present their identities (Cavalcante, 2016; Kitzie, 2018). However, social media platforms do not always afford trans users what they need to accurately represent their identities, resulting in users finding ways to strategically use platform settings to express themselves (Cavalcante, 2016; Bivens, 2017). How trans people use social media for identity work sparked my interest in trans identity management online. This led to the research questions that guided this project:

- How do trans individuals navigate identity management *across* social media platforms and accounts?
  - What role does social media play in how trans people share their identities?
  - How does the type of social media site affect posting behavior, particularly when it comes to trans content?

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this paper I use the term trans as a shorthand for transgender to be more inclusive of the diversity of genders. Susan Stryker (2008) uses transgender to refer to “people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender” (p.1). Transgender can also be used to refer to someone who identifies with a gender different from the gender they were assigned at birth.

Through interviews with trans social media users (N=13), this study finds that social media is an integral part of participants' trans identity experience. Participants are using social media strategically in relation to their trans identity by taking advantage of different platforms and accounts as well as curating their networks and content. First, I explore the intersection of social media and trans identity by detailing how social media has impacted participants' understandings and expressions of their identities, particularly the impact of online trans networks. Next, I cover online identity presentation, finding that participants occasionally have a disconnect between their online and offline identity presentation. Further, I find that the type of content and the frequency with which it was shared was often dependent on the social media platform. Finally, I explore how users curate their social media experiences. I find that users take advantage of multiple accounts and platforms for different identity expressions. Further, participants make active decisions about what kind of content they post, who they allow to be in their network, and how they engage with social media.

## **RELATED WORKS**

### *Social Media as a Trans Resource*

Personal networks and the Internet are the information resources most cited by trans people (Adams & Peirce, 2005; Beirgier & Jackson, 2007; Drake & Bielefield, 2017; Pohjanen & Kortelainen, 2016), making social media seem like the perfect combination of the two, allowing trans people to connect and share with each other. Online groups and communities allow trans people to connect with others in spite of geographic and social differences (Psihopaidas, 2016). Social media often works as a resource for trans individuals, allowing them to connect with their networks and solicit and share information (Cannon et al., 2017). When discussing the methods used, Farber (2017) talks about the benefits of online forums as data sources, noting that more

personal information may be shared there than in face-to-face interactions and that multiple diverse viewpoints can be seen (Farber, 2017, p. 257). This may, in part, be because of the chance for anonymity and separation from offline identity (Blotner & Rajunov, 2018, p. 226). These reasons also make these forums, and other social media sites, rich sources of information for trans people looking to learn more about trans issues.

### *Social Media as Source of Community*

Social media is also a source of community for trans people. Social media can perform sociopolitical and cultural functions such as social, traditional, and experiential learning and teaching. In this way, trans people can learn about the dominant issues in trans communities while also learning and creating a shared, collective history (Cavalcante, 2018). Social media sites can become “counterpublics,” which are groups created and maintained by members and centered around marginalized identities. Tumblr has functioned as a “queer utopia” and a “queer vortextuality” (Cavalcante, 2018, p.2) simultaneously, providing immersion into queer culture and discourse. At its best, Tumblr centered queerness and transness (Haimson et. al, 2019), providing users who had experienced marginalization in their everyday lives a place where queerness is valued and diverse (Cavalcante, 2018). Self-disclosure and identity management have community-building effects as well. Disclosure can act as a social currency, a way to gain influence and attention or make connections (Butler et al., 2011). Sharing online is also a communicative act (Cavalcante, 2016, p.119) and can lead to social benefits for users (Butler et al., 2011, p. 81).

*Self-Disclosure Online*

Self-disclosure, according to Jourard and Lasakow (1958) is the “process of making the self known to others” (p. 91, cited in Butler, Bateman, & Pike, 2011, p. 80). Which is then made up of three main aspects: amount, depth, and duration. In terms of social media, self-disclosure is any personal information that a user communicates on a site (p. 80). Self-disclosure on social media can happen in a number of ways. The earliest of these is the creation of a personal profile that can include varying degrees of personal information, which is often some form of name, birth date, photographs, gender, sexuality, location, contact information, or interests. By including these items on profiles or sharing them in posts, users are self-disclosing information (p. 80). Like identity management, self-disclosure can vary across platforms and types of disclosure. Butler et al. (2011) identify three layers of disclosure: interests, emotions, and facts. Different users will share these aspects of themselves to different degrees, but users are more likely to share biographic information that they view as already public.

As Butler et al. (2011) note, self-disclosure can lead to social connections. This is just one of the reasons why an individual may disclose their trans status on social media. Andalibi and Forte (2018b) introduce “network-level reciprocal disclosure,” a theory applying disclosure reciprocity to social networking sites, particularly when it comes to stigmatized disclosures. Through studying people who disclosed their experiences with pregnancy loss on social media, Andalibi and Forte (2018b) found that by seeing others post about their experiences, users felt more comfortable sharing their own. Further, by disclosing, users were able to become a source of support for others in their networks who had similar experiences (Andalibi and Forte 2018b).

How much trans and LGBTQ individuals disclose about their gender and/or sexuality on social media affects what they post and how they interact with LGBTQ content (Fox & Warber, 2015). This can also affect how much they share about other aspects of their identities. Fox and

Warber observed a “spiral of silence” (p. 91) wherein LGBTQ individuals self-policed their social media use due to the assumption of largely anti-LGBTQ networks (p. 92). As LGBTQ+ people move through varying levels of “outness,” their identity management and social media activity shift as well. McConnell et al. (2018) found that LGBTQ youth manage outness to different groups in four distinct patterns: “High Overall Outness,” “Low Overall Outness,” “Less Out to Family,” and “More Out to Family” (p. 11-12). Relationship connectivity on Facebook differed greatly depending on what outness cluster participants were in (p. 15). Even those who were in the High Overall Outness group had to manage identity in different ways on social media, including a participant who maintains a separate Facebook account for family members (p. 15).

Haimson (2018) found that trans users often present multiple identities simultaneously across social media sites in order to keep identities and networks separate. These separate networks allowed users to feel a sense of anonymity that led to more openness and self-disclosure. In this separation of identities and networks, Haimson (2018) found that, when trans users wanted to disclose their trans identity to wider offline networks, Facebook was most often used. By posting on Facebook, users were able to mass disclose their trans identity, making this self-disclosure often a defining moment of transition (Haimson, 2018). As social media users, trans people often carefully censor their social media, maintaining boundaries between sites and networks, making thoughtful choices about who to follow and allow to follow them, and staying aware of site settings. While this monitoring is a regular occurrence, it is difficult to maintain (Cannon et al., 2017).

Although some self-disclosure (such as coming out) can have the risk of negative effects, users still choose to disclose publicly online (Green, Bobrowicz, & Ang, 2015, p.705). Green et al. (2015) studied Youtube as a site of self-disclosure. One affordance of Youtube is the fact that it can be asynchronous, creating a disconnect between the act of disclosing and the audience who

will view it. Anonymity is an affordance for many social media sites, but Youtube does not always afford this due to its visible nature. Videos that include the creator in them cannot be considered anonymous because appearance and other demographics are visible. “Thus, video is more revealing than a textual disclosure of the same information” (708). However, content creators on Youtube do not always show their physical selves. Youtube creators may have different levels of publicness in their videos, often taking advantage of the site’s affordances to limit who access their content or limiting what personal information they share (Lange, 2007). Trans users may also use Youtube to disclose bullying or cyberbullying or other negative experiences, which has the potential to lead to negative responses, but the possibility for positive responses or forming new connections can make up for the potential negatives (Green et. al, 2015).

### *Online Identity*

Social media, like other social interactions, allows people to control, manipulate, and maintain the impressions they make, allowing users to manage identity presentation across platforms (Syed, Dhillon, & Merrick, 2018, p. 4). In managing identity and impressions, users are doing identity work, which are the things people do “to give meaning to themselves or others” (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996, p. 115, cited in Kitzie, 2018). This work is done to “create desired images of themselves” according to the rules and norms of their identities (Goffman, 1967; 1963; 1959, cited in Kitzie, 2018). In a study on bloggers and Second Life users, Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) found that users worked to create their offline life online, limiting the discrepancies between the two. At the same time, users made some edits to their online presentation, which they argue exemplifies Goffman’s (1956) framework, in that “when in ‘front stage’, people deliberately choose to project a given identity” (Bullingham & Vasconcelos,

2013, p. 2). Not only do users manage their identities and impressions online, but they are aware of this management and manipulation (Krämer & Winter, 2008).

Social media can be a “testing ground for identity” (Cavalcante, 2016, p. 115), where users can try out different identities, names, and presentations. Trans users often actively manage their virtual identity, controlling how public their identity is (Cavalcante, 2016). Trans users work within the frames of the social media sites they are on to express their identities. Trans people often find “‘tactical’ (de Certeau 1984) ways to explore [their] gender identity” (Cavalcante, 2016, p. 114) with the technology available to them. Typically, social media platforms do not offer affordances useful for identity expression (Kitzie, 2018). Some sites, like Tumblr, have provided users with “the changeability, network separation, and identity realness” (Haimson et. al, 2019, p. 2) that allow for transition work and identity presentation. However, this is not always the case, and sites may make changes that affect these affordances (Haimson et. al, 2019), leading to users tactically using site features and general assumptions of sites to make their profiles be viewed as authentic. For example, prior to Facebook adding custom gender options in 2014, users were able to hack the site in a way that allowed them to remove any gender designation from their accounts, though this lack of gender was still noted on Facebook’s end. However, this hack was fixed when the custom gender options were introduced, making it so that accounts now had to be associated with a gender that was recognized by Facebook (Bivens, 2017). Used together, social media platforms can work as “social transition machinery,” allowing users to do transition work and have separate networks of support throughout transition periods (Haimson, 2018).

In summary, previous work has covered how trans people use social media as a resource for education, identity exploration, and to connect with community. Other research has focused on how trans people share content related to their identities online, typically focusing on

individual platforms and their affordances. In prior research, I noticed a lack of work that explored how trans people created and used multiple accounts and networks on social media in order to explore and present their identities. With this project, I expand on prior work to explore how trans individuals present their identities online, particularly to discover what decisions and considerations went into their social media presentation across different profiles and platforms. Further, I explore how trans people create positive online experiences for themselves.

## **METHODS**

Participants were recruited via social media and from participants from our research group's prior research projects who consented to being contacted for further studies. Recruitment posts were publicly posted on my Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts where they were then shared. Recruitment information was also shared in a number of Discord servers and private Facebook groups that were geared towards trans communities. Respondents were given a link to a screening survey that asked for demographic information (e.g. age, gender identity, pronouns) and general social media use (i.e. what sites respondents used and which were used regularly). Of the 147 survey respondents, and 20 participants from prior studies, 59 were contacted and, due to availability and response, 13 interviews were conducted. Participants were selected based on their screening survey responses, particularly their gender, age, and race, in order to reach a diverse group of participants and experiences.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender/Pronouns</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Social Media Used</b>
<b>P1</b>	trans, she/her	33	Black/Multi	Facebook, Twitter
<b>P2</b>	trans, he/him	25	African American	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Grindr, Tumblr

<b>P3</b>	Non-Binary, they/them	19	White/Hispanic	Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, Reddit, Discord
<b>P4</b>	Non-binary trans femme, they/them	31	Asian American	Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, LinkedIn, Instagram, Reddit
<b>P5</b>	male, he/him	18	White	Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat, Discord
<b>P6</b>	woman, she/her	32	White	Twitter, Discord
<b>P7</b>	Non-binary transmasc, they/them	25	Biracial (Asian and White)	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram
<b>P8</b>	Genderqueer, they/them	18	White	Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Discord
<b>P9</b>	non-binary, they/them	19	African/American	Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit
<b>P10</b>	non-binary, they/x	29	Black & indigenous	Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Discord
<b>P11</b>	non-binary, they/them	20	African American	Twitter, Tumblr, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, Discord, Reddit, Vent
<b>P12</b>	non-binary, they/them	35	Asian	Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, LinkedIn, Instagram, Reddit, Discord, FetLife
<b>P13</b>	trans/non-binary, they/them	19	White, Latinx/Latine, some Native American heritage	Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, Discord, Amino

Table 1. Participant Demographics. Demographics are presented as shared on the screening survey.

Interviews were semi-structured and took place via video or voice call. Interview questions were loosely grouped into four categories, Social Media, Identity, Social Media & Trans Identity, and Social Media & Self Esteem. Interviews lasted on average 68 minutes (SD=13.16). All interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. All participants were compensated with a \$40 incentive. Every step in this research process was approved by the University of Michigan's Institutional Review Board.

The first two interview transcripts were coded separately by myself and three other researchers who assisted on the project using line-by-line inductive open coding (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). The four of us then met to discuss our codes and begin consolidating and categorizing them. After this, I finished consolidating the codes and organizing them into themes using axial coding. I then coded the rest of the interview transcripts using these codes.

## **FINDINGS**

### ***Social Media Use and Trans Identity***

#### *Social Media Impact on Identity*

Through social media, participants were able to learn about trans terms, issues, and resources as well as connect to other trans people and communities. Because of this, social media had a major impact on participants' identities. Without social media, P10 would not have been able to engage with trans content: *"It's definitely helped me to engage more and learn more things about myself than I would have in life."* Similarly, social media opened up the door for P11 to explore their identity: *"no one really tells you that there's more out there than just being a man or being a woman. So social media definitely helped to open that up for me, and to show me that there are other people who feel how I feel."* For P3, social media helped them

become their authentic self, saying, *“I think I’m much more authentically myself now than I would be if I didn’t have Twitter.”* Because of social media, participants found themselves more open and comfortable with their identities, which translated to offline spaces as well. For P8, social media helped them become more confident in their identity: *“these sites allow[ed] me to be more unapologetic about my identity.”* In particular, they found that the ability to be anonymous online helped them express themselves better on- and offline: *“the anonymity has allowed me to be more forceful in my identity, which has translated to my real-life expression.”* Because of the community they had found online, P11 joined an on-campus organization, sharing, *“I actually, this year, just joined an organization on campus for queer and trans people of color. And I don’t think I would’ve done that if it wasn’t for the fact that I had been on Vent<sup>2</sup> and had been kind of exposed to that prior to being on campus...having that type of community on Vent first helped me be able to make that community in person.”* The impact that social media had on participants’ trans identities went beyond just online spaces to affect their everyday, offline lives. Without social media, participants felt that they would not have had the same opportunity to learn about and self-reflect on their trans identities.

### *Trans Networks*

Social media provides a way for trans people to connect with each other and with larger trans communities. Every participant shared instances where they learned more about themselves or trans issues more broadly through seeing and making connections with other trans people online. Participants typically found online trans networks either through seeking out trans communities or through their preexisting offline connections. For participants who did

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<sup>2</sup> Vent is a social media app to “Express your feelings and connect with people who care” (vent.co, 2020). Users are encouraged to share their feelings in text-based posts, interact with others’ posts using a variety of built-in reactions, and create and join groups (vent.co, 2020).

not have other trans people in their lives, finding community online was a way to feel less alone. As P2 put it, *“I sought [trans communities] out just for a sense of community to find more people like me. So I don't feel so alone in this world even though I'm not.”* Trans communities online were often the places where participants first learned about trans identities and issues. For P10, this helped them learn more about themselves: *“I probably would not have discovered certain things about myself, I guess if I wasn't engaging with people in the community online.”* Beyond that, participants were also able to learn things about other identities. P8 shared about this experience of learning through community: *“once you get into that community, the people who you follow in that community are going to be posting about aspects of their identity that you might not share. So that's sort of a way to learn just through being in, and interacting within a community.”* By learning through being in online communities, users are able to learn not only about different identities and terms but also see how other people express these identities.

By searching for trans content, following individuals and accounts centered on trans identities, and connecting with trans networks, participants were able to find examples of ways of being. These examples helped participants learn about their own identities as well as other identities. Participants then used these examples as models for how they wanted to be. Some participants found representation online that greatly impacted how they viewed themselves and how they came to understand their identities. For P6, seeing how others lived and expressed their gender helped her expand her understanding of gender: *“growing up I just didn't see that and not having these connections over the internet and not seeing that it just kind of seems like the only real option is to be inoffensively male and to not feel good about it, but that's all you can do. But meeting people and seeing that there are other options has meant a lot and has showed me that there were other ways to be.”* Similarly, P5 was able to find different examples

of masculinity: *“Tumblr, in particular, helped me realize that I didn’t have to be one way of masculine...I could be a guy and also like nail polish. I could be a guy and wear dresses, and that helped me get to the place I am now where I’m very comfortable with my feminine side and doing feminine things as a trans person...It also made me realize that I didn’t have to go through all the special stages of being trans, that there’s no one way to be trans.”* P9 was able to find examples of other non-binary people whose gender expressions were similar to theirs which helped them feel more comfortable in their identity: *“Through Twitter, I was able to see other people who are still nonbinary and still dress as femme as before they came out. So it kind of solidified the fact that it’s okay that I generally still prefer feminine clothing, because other people do it, too. We’re all on a broad spectrum. It was cool to see every color on the spectrum of how people identify and it just let me take a step back and say, ‘Yes, you are fine. You are allowed to be.’”* Seeing examples of trans people living their lives also helped participants feel more self-confident. For P6, these examples helped her feel confident to come out: *“I feel like just seeing how they presented themselves and seeing them unafraid to present themselves as themselves publicly was exciting and eye-opening and helped me to be more brave about understanding myself and coming out and transitioning too maybe.”* Through seeing examples on social media of trans people living their lives and expressing their genders in a multitude of ways, participants could see that there were options beyond the rigid, binary understandings of gender that they were taught and, beyond that, there was not just one way to be trans.

In some cases, participants felt that trans networks instead provided examples of how not to be. Because there is not just one way to be trans, there are also people on social media whose identity presentations did not align with participants’. For example, P7 saw a particular subset of people online who they did not agree with and then used that group as an example of

how they did not want to be: *“I like to use those as examples of how I don't want to ever be, because it's really rough to watch. So I can't imagine myself ever wanting to be the same thing.”* Whether or not participants saw people on social media who reflected their exact identities or expressions, it was clear that using social media to see a diverse representation of identities was impactful, especially in the early stages of transition. Through following and interacting with diverse trans networks, participants learned about trans identities and gained confidence in their own identities.

### ***Online Identity Presentation***

#### *Online and Offline Disconnect*

Identity presentation was not always consistent for participants. In some cases, there was a disconnect in how they presented their identities on social media and how they expressed them in everyday, offline life. Some participants were already out as trans in their offline social lives but their online identities did not reflect that. This disconnect often caused distress with using social media. This was the case for P2 who shared, *“But in real life, I was pretty socially transitioned. I changed my name with my friends and everything and my pronouns but just not social media-wise for quite a while which was horrible honestly... It was really affirming in my everyday life. But then I'd get on Facebook or Instagram or Twitter at the time and just get like misgendered and deadnamed constantly.”* Because of this, P2's social media use went down during this period: *“It made me want to use social media a lot less. I cut down on my usage throughout that time, way less than I do now.”* One participant, P3, was already out as trans online and offline but their identity had shifted from trans masculine to non-binary, so there was a point in time where their online identity did not line up with their actual identity: *“I identified strictly as a trans, I was trans masculine, so trans male... And there was like a*

*transition period where just this past summer where I still had like he/him pronouns in my bio on Twitter. I still was using the name that I matched my Twitter, all of that stuff. When I knew that at the time, I was not identifying that way, I was going by a different name and different pronouns.*” When participants’ identities were reflected both on- and offline, their social media use often increased. For P10, social media feels like the place where they can be open, often more so than they are in person: *“I use social media a lot more since coming out just because that's where all the people are and that's where I felt I could really be open about things. Well, being open to my friends about things online that maybe I wasn't so open about in person.”* Prior to being out, P11 felt a disconnect in their identity presentation, but, *“now that I'm out, and I feel like posting pictures of myself and things like that, it's just like that's just who I am. There's not a separation there that I felt was there before.”* P8 shared that how they present their identity online and offline is consistent, but they used online spaces to become comfortable with sharing their identity: *“I don't really represent myself differently online than I do in person. However, I did use the terms online before I used them in person to become more comfortable with calling myself any of these identities.”* Participants’ identity presentations were not always consistent across online and offline spaces. These inconsistencies had the potential to cause distress and affect social media use, but, when there was no longer a disconnect in identity presentation, participants often felt more comfortable sharing online.

#### *Identity Content Dependent on Platform*

Participants typically used different social media platforms in different ways, often when it came to identity content. By identity content, I mean any content related to trans identity. This content could be personal and posted by the individual or content posted by others that participants then shared to their profiles. For some participants, the nature of different

platforms affected how they shared, or did not share, their identity. P3 felt that different content was more appropriate on some platforms than on others. When sharing about disclosing their trans identity online, they felt that a long post about it would not fit on the site: *“I think Instagram is just less of like making posts kind of social media. I think it's a lot more about pictures rather than like making entire posts like that. So I just didn't feel like it was like, I guess appropriate for Instagram.”* In the same vein, other participants found some platforms to be more appropriate for trans content. For P9, Twitter is the place where they feel most comfortable sharing their identity: *“Twitter is kind of my safe haven where I'm like they/them pronouns in the bio.”* The other sites they are on lack what they feel is central to their identity, *“I would say Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, I haven't found the way for me to bring my caring for other communities to the frontline...So I feel those don't really touch my identity as much.”* Because they had not found ways to care for other communities on those sites, they felt that those sites were less connected to their identity overall.

For some participants, how public or private their account on a platform was impacted the content they posted. In P4's case, while they are open about their identity on every platform, the type of content they share differs: *“I think on Facebook...I'm very open about it in that I post a lot of memes related to being trans, or I'll talk about my experiences that I've gone through. But I was thinking...I list my pronouns and my identity there on Instagram and Twitter. But I don't do that on Facebook.”* Part of this decision is based on who would be connected to these accounts: *“If I'm adding people on Facebook, they're probably people I know...on Instagram too. People are finding me, but that's mostly, again, people that I know... At least in the little public blurb, I'm probably the most vocal on my Twitter... because that's the most public. That's where strangers who know nothing about me are going to find me.”* Because more

people who did not personally know them would see their public Twitter account, they were more open about their identity in order to inform those connections.

Further, other participants were more likely to share identity content in online groups, rather than on their own pages. In P2's case, he kept most of his trans content activity to Facebook, and Facebook Groups in particular: *"I don't really do much of any gender or identity things on Twitter or Snapchat too often. But usually Facebook is where I express my identity the most but just in certain groups, not outly on my profile."* P10 also felt more comfortable sharing trans content in groups: *"That's been a good addition to Facebook is allowing groups and things because I engage a lot more with people through groups."* Participants' identity content was often dependent on the platform. Whether this had to do with the affordances of the site or their own interpretations of a platform, participants felt that some sites were more appropriate for certain content.

## ***Curating Social Media Experiences***

### **Multiple Accounts**

#### *Multiple Accounts on Different Platforms*

Participants found ways to strategically curate their social media experiences to work for them. A simple way this becomes clear is through having accounts on a variety of platforms or even having multiple accounts on a single platform. Participants had fairly clear understandings about how they used different social media platforms. While there was clear overlap in some instances, overall, use and content depended on the platform. These platform differences covered both general content and trans content. Some participants distinguished accounts by how professional or how personal they were, like P3 who said, *"On my college campus, I'm a very active person. I'm very well known just because I participate in a lot of leadership*

*positions...So I do have an agreement with my school that I keep my Twitter very, kind of professional almost...My Instagram is definitely a lot more personal use I would say. I don't ever post anything political or social justice or anything like that.*" Regardless of their intention in using different platforms, participants shared their reasoning for their varied use.

### *Multiple Accounts on Same Platform*

Similar to the use of different platforms, participants had clear reasons for having multiple accounts on the same site. P2 described his reasoning for having multiple Twitter accounts as wanting separate places for different types of expression: *"Sometimes I just want to express myself differently. Like some things I share on Twitter...I won't share on the other Twitter or just sometimes I want to say stuff and I don't want certain people to see."* Personal versus professional presentation was a big reason for users to create multiple accounts. P3 described the differences between their public and private Instagrams as: *"With my locked Instagram, a lot of it is like, dumb college kids things. So parties and things like that...And then on my not locked Instagram and my Twitter is very like model student. This is what our local university student is like, they participate in all of these events and they're getting really good grades."* Similarly, P8 described their presentation on their private Instagram compared to their public account as, *"It's more who I am at home, versus a professional person."* By having multiple accounts, users are able to present their identities differently depending on the profile, allowing them to express themselves in a variety of ways.

Another participant had a second, private account in order to ease the pressure they felt posting on a public account. As P11 described, *"With my main, I very rarely post, mainly because posting on the main comes with a lot of, for some reason, pressure, I guess, for me. I feel like things have to be perfect. I have to have the perfect caption, the perfect set of pictures."*

*Instagram, since it's a very photo-centric social media platform, you want to make yourself look a certain way, or make sure you're always doing something that looks interesting.*" On the other hand, on their private account, or "Finsta" (meaning Fake Instagram), they felt more free to post: *"then for my Finsta, I use that one a lot. I have a lot of friends on there who are fairly active. So I'll use it a lot. I use that one kind of just to post my thoughts on things."* For this participant, having a second account with a limited network allowed them to relieve some of the pressure they felt with posting on a photo-centric platform.

While not every participant had multiple accounts on a single platform, there was an understanding that users may choose to do so to create spaces for different types of expression. Some participants did not currently have multiple accounts on a site, but had considered it at one point. P6 had considered creating a second account that was not connected to her identity where she could share content that she typically avoids on her current account, saying, *"I've thought about the possibility of having a second Twitter account because maybe if I actually want to talk about politics and start tweeting more, I wouldn't want anything on the account maybe that could connect it to me. At least that's been a concern in the past."* Another participant, P10, did not feel the need to have a separation in accounts because of how they already present themselves online: *"That's just a part of... For me at least a part of aging. I don't care to have a separation anymore. So, I think who I am online is who I am for the most part."* Whether or not participants chose to create separate accounts, they acknowledged that this type of separation in identity presentation could be useful.

#### *Separate Accounts for Separate Networks*

In both cases, whether a participant had multiple profiles on the same site or a presence on multiple sites, the network they were connected to on the account played a role in what their

activity on that account was like. Because P4 had private accounts on Facebook and Instagram, they felt more comfortable posting on those accounts in comparison to their Twitter that was more public: *“I feel a little bit freer because I know that most of the people who are following me there are personal connections. So I think I feel a little bit freer to post whatever I feel.”* Similarly, P8 was more open on platforms where they were not connected to family members or where there were networks they wanted to avoid: *“It's mostly just the communities that are fostered on certain sites that I want to avoid, or like on Facebook, I'm mostly just friends with family members, and I don't necessarily want them to see my 3:00 AM thoughts when I'm sick and bored. No one in my family is on the social media that I do engage with.”* Being able to have more control over networks was a motivator in how participants used different platforms. For example, P3 limited who they interacted with on Twitter, but had a less restricted network on Facebook: *“There's a very few amount of people that I will choose to interact with from high school. And so, they're all on my Facebook but not on my Twitter or Instagram for the most part. If they're on my Twitter or Instagram, it's because I choose to interact with them. But on Facebook, I feel like it's a formality, you add everybody you know on Facebook whether you like them or not.”* The network that a user had on an account was often the main motivating factor in what their activity on a site was like. To manage this, participants often had separate networks on different platforms or on different accounts on a single site.

In some cases, participants limited the trans content they posted because of their networks. Because he had a largely uninformed network, P2 chose to limit the trans content he posted in order to avoid needing to educate his network: *“It's just like I don't feel like explaining it over and over and over, over again...certain things about my identity, I don't feel like explaining.”* Similarly, P13 monitored what type of content they were posting depending on if they had family members in their network because, *“They don't understand the same way...So*

on social media, like Facebook or Twitter where I have some of my extended family, I'm a little bit more careful about what I post just because I don't want it to be something that I hear about a week later." However, on other sites where they had a more diverse and larger trans network, "I will generally post things that are a little bit more in-depth because I know that the people looking at it probably have a little bit better knowledge of what I'm talking about, but I'm also not as careful with talking about things that maybe people that aren't part of the community wouldn't understand or be conscious of." When participants had a larger trans network, they felt more comfortable posting trans content, like P4, who explained how having trans networks made them feel understood, sharing, "When I gain other trans followers, I know that I can talk about being trans in a way that most of my cis friends on Facebook might not understand." In particular, P4 found a network of other trans Asian Americans with whom they shared multiple identities and experiences, and because of that, they are more open to sharing: "I know that a lot of the people who are following me understand those experiences, so I do talk pretty openly about that there too." Participants altered their posting behavior depending on what network they were connected to on a social media platform. When these networks were uninformed on trans issues, participants tended to limit the trans content they posted, but when participants had trans networks, they felt more comfortable sharing about their identities.

#### *Separate Accounts for Trans Content*

Often, participants created or used additional accounts specifically for trans content. When participants were out in some contexts but not others, they often created new accounts to reflect their identity, like P2, who at one time had two Facebook accounts: "I made a second Facebook account around the April of when I started coming out socially more but I didn't come out to my family so I had two separate Facebook accounts for about a year and a half

*before I came out to my family.*” A participant’s networks played a large role in these decisions as well. Creating a new account was one way to trim down one’s network of people who were unsupportive, which is what P2 did: *“To weed out all the people who weren't okay with it, it was really way easier to have the second Facebook because then they can friend request me... Out of the thousand or so friends think I had at the time. I only think I have like 200 friends on Facebook now because of that process. And that's so much better.”* Similarly, P13 has a separate Tumblr for gender and sexuality so that there is no unwelcome overlap in networks from their main blog: *“I have a separate blog that's dedicated to gender and sexuality, in which case it's like, the people that are going to find that are already going to be looking for it. So I'm not as worried.”* By creating a separate space for trans identity expression, participants were able to express themselves more freely and with less concern over who may be seeing the content. Maintaining separate accounts allowed individuals to limit trans content on accounts where they were connected to people who were not aware of their trans identities or who were uninformed about trans issues. This way, users could openly share trans content while avoiding the responsibility of educating or explaining it to their networks.

One participant reported creating an additional account because of the inability to change settings on a platform to reflect their trans identity. For example, Snapchat does not allow users to change their usernames, so when P3 realized they would be meeting new people, they created a new Snapchat account: *“I kept the old dead name Snapchat probably two years after I transitioned and then I realized I would be meeting a bunch of freshmen...that I didn't necessarily have to tell I was trans...I realized if they had my Snapchat, they would have my dead name. And that's when I was like I should probably make a new one so that I don't have to explain my username every time I give it out.”* Only one participant shared an instance where platform settings motivated their account creation, but it stands as an example of the ways in

which social media platforms can present barriers for trans users. Previous research has touched on this (see Haimson & Hoffman, 2016; Kitzie, 2018; and Scheuerman et. al, 2018), and future research could explore how interacting with these settings might affect users' online activity and identity presentation.

While participants found alternate accounts to be useful in times of transition, they also came with a particular set of problems. Managing multiple accounts with conflicting identities associated with them was difficult for P2, who shared, *“Having two different ones were really complicated because I hated getting deadnamed obviously and misgendered in one. And then having to block everyone that would possibly see me and would know.”* Part of this difficulty had to do with how personal he felt that Facebook, and social media in general, was for him. By having separate accounts, P2 felt that he was hiding being trans: *“Trying to hide being trans was awful on Facebook. Because when I was learning the most about my identity and who I was and was really trying to express it in every way I could and not being able to do that to the world or me perceiving that I couldn't do that was crap.”* A disconnect in identity presentation across different accounts or offline versus online can make navigating social media difficult or stressful.

In order to create and maintain an ideal social media experience, participants created and managed multiple social media accounts. Every participant had an account on more than one social media platform and many had multiple accounts on certain platforms (most often Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter). Users then made decisions about how they used each account and what type of content they posted based on the platform or the network to which they were connected.

## Curating Experience

### *Curating Content*

Participants often actively worked to make their social media experiences positive. This curation work was generally focused in two areas: content and networks. Participants who focused on content considered both the content they viewed and that which they posted. This curation was typically an active decision for participants. Some participants had clear rules and guidelines for themselves that guided their online activity. P7 said, *“I have some safeguards set in place to make sure that social media will not affect me negatively, disproportionately”* including *“a very strict no engagement policy regarding any sort of argument or heated discussion.”* For P9, these guidelines were different: *“I don't look at my notifications. In the third tab in Twitter (where Notifications are found on the Twitter app), I try not to look at that until a month after I go on a retweeting spree...and that makes it a very positive platform.”* For some, these rules were less strict and focused more on self-enforced avoidance, like P13 who shared, *“I try to unplug as soon as it gets harmful, so I try to get good experiences out of social media and not bad ones. It doesn't always work, but worth a try.”* In most cases, these rules were implemented by participants as a result of negative experiences they had online in the past. Because they had negative interactions with other users or were negatively impacted by content previously, they worked to limit these happening again. By curating social media experiences in these ways, participants can tailor their overall experiences and, to an extent, control their moods associated with online spaces, like P2, who described his social media experience as: *“Mostly positive. I try to stay away from the negative ones cause I already have such negative self-confidence. I'm trying to get the good ones, the good vibes only when I'm on social media.”* Participants were able to recognize what kind of content or activity would lead to negative social media experiences and as a result could take action to limit or altogether avoid those experiences.

### *Curating Networks*

In other cases, this curation was focused on the networks that users were connected to on social media. Participants were often quick to unfollow, block, or otherwise limit their exposure to accounts that would negatively impact their online experience. For example, P2 did this by blocking people or avoiding groups that were negative: *“Yeah, I am quick to block anybody on social media if I don't like you easily. I run out of blocks from Grindr daily. I try to only post in groups that are super affirming and positive to other people.”* Similarly, P8 unfollowed or blocked accounts, but they also regularly followed accounts that posted positive content: *“I definitely have been more liberal with unfollowing or blocking people because they post content that upsets me, and I've definitely followed people who post content that I find good.”* This behavior also extended beyond just those that participants were following to include those who followed their accounts as well. For example, P7 is discriminant on who they allow to follow them: *“I like to vet the people that followed me for an extended period of time to see if I want to see their content...So, I'm just like okay, so this person has followed me but will they still be following me in two months. And if they are, then yeah, sure I will follow them back, because then they are invested in my personhood.”* Participants were also selective with the groups and communities that they joined. When interacting with a group or online community, P10 considers the group's rules: *“I usually won't join a lot of groups if they do not have in their rules like, “Hey, don't be a piece of shit and don't be racist, sexist, transphobic, homophobic”. That's usually a red flag to me.”* P2 similarly vets groups he is considering joining, explaining, *“I just look at previous posts and see how the other group members reacted and then see how the moderators reacted too. People's negative comments also. And if they reacted in a way that I think is affirming I'm cool with them.”* When it comes to the individuals and communities that

users are connected to online, participants make decisions and take action to tailor these networks. In doing so, participants are actively working to create spaces online that provide more positive and supportive experiences.

## **DISCUSSION**

By actively managing how they presented their identities, what sites they used, what networks they connected with, and what content they engaged with, trans users were able to tailor their social media experiences to ensure that these experiences were largely positive. Overwhelmingly users' online networks affected how they presented their identities. Previous research found that users maintain separate networks, allowing them to present different identities to different networks (see Haimson, 2018). The same was true for some participants, but overall participants presented a consistent identity across platforms and accounts (e.g. using the same name and pronouns that reflected their identity). What differed were the ways in which they shared this identity with different networks, particularly when it came to the kind of content they shared (i.e. what kind of trans content they shared and how often they shared it). Building on Andalibi and Forte's (2018b) work on network-level reciprocal disclosure, I found that, like the users in their study, trans users' decisions about sharing their identity also relied on their perceptions of their networks. When participants' networks included people who were uninformed on or unsupportive of trans issues, people they had fewer connections with, or people with influence over their livelihood (i.e. coworkers or employers), they limited or were more careful with the type of content that they shared. Participants were typically more open with identity content when their network on an account consisted of close friends and people with whom they shared identities. So, while participants had relatively consistent identities across accounts, their content differed.

Where prior research has centered complications with site affordances and trans identity (see Haimson & Hoffman, 2016; Kitzie, 2018; and Scheuerman et. al, 2018), participants in this study did not highlight this as a concern. I found that users were more concerned with what type of activity they associated with the site, either in what kind of content was shared on the site (i.e. photos on Instagram) or what networks they had on the platform. It is hard to say whether this is reflective of improvements to social media platforms or of users finding work arounds for site limitations. Likely, it is a mix of the two. Further research could expand on this work by more directly studying how individuals understand different platforms and how these understandings impact their use of these sites, both as it relates to their identities and social media use more broadly. In doing so, future work could explore the question of whether it is site improvements or user workarounds that are reducing users' experiences with site limitations.

With this study, I expand on existing research on trans identity and social media, confirming findings that trans people use social media for a variety of identity work and finding that this online work has large impacts on individual's identities and offline presentation. Previous research on social media ecosystems has found that users make decisions about their social media use based on multiple considerations, including networks and norms, and across platforms (Zhao et al., 2016; DeVito et al., 2018). I confirm and expand on this work by highlighting how trans users in particular do this, finding that, when making decisions about sharing identity content, users are largely concerned with what networks they are connected to on social media, while also considering what they understand to be the norms of a particular platform. While both Zhao et al. (2016) and DeVito et al. (2018) are concerned with how users navigate social media across platforms, neither focus on how users manage multiple accounts on a single platform. I fill this gap by highlighting why and how participants created and used multiple accounts on a platform for different types of content and expression. I build on existing

research on trans people and social media use by focusing on users' overall social media landscapes and exploring how trans people strategically use different accounts and platforms in both separate and complementary ways. Future research could examine this further by asking more direct questions about users' understandings of different platforms and how they came to those understandings. Further, additional studies could be conducted with users of other identities or by examining how other demographics, such as age, impact these understandings.

### *Design Implications*

One main consideration for design this study points to is improved content moderation settings. Participants worked to curate their social media experiences to limit negative interactions and content. In doing so they often moderated their own social media use as well as appreciated online spaces (such as Facebook Groups) where more moderation occurred. Social media platforms should increase content moderation on their end, but more importantly, they should make it easier for users to moderate and curate their own experiences on the sites. These curation settings should be simple for users to put in place and to change as their preferences change.

## **CONCLUSION**

Social media has greatly impacted how trans people explore their identities. The largest of these impacts is in the connections that trans users make with other trans people. Through these connections and communities, users are able to learn about trans identities and see diverse examples of what being trans might look like. Beyond interaction, users also present their identities online in different ways. This presentation may look different at different moments in time, may not always align with how a user identifies, and often differs depending

on the platform used and the network with which it is shared. In attempts to ensure an enjoyable social media experience, trans users may take advantage of multiple accounts on a single platform or the different affordances of multiple platforms. Users are typically aware of what kind of content they share where, particularly when it comes to content related to their trans identities. Further, users often make decisions about who they are connected to online, both in who they follow and who they allow to follow them. By doing so, users are able to curate their online experiences so that the content they see, the content they share, and their interactions with their networks lead to overall positive experiences.

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