

**“Trans Enough” for Tumblr? Gender Accountability and Identity Challenge in Online
Communities for Trans and Non-Binary Youth**

by

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*“I believe in trans people...because we, as a people, are marked above all by our integrity. There is not much you can say that describes all trans people. We are a broad and heterogeneous bunch. But you can say this: contrary to what the cheap punchlines and propagandists, the frat boys and the Womyn’s Landers, the sketch comedians and the murder defendants would have you believe, we are not united in a grand campaign of deceit. We may not be magical, or magically virtuous, but we are, as a people, astonishingly **honest**.*

You look at those numbers we’ve let outline us – the grief and the blood and the hurt, writ vast and cruel – and that is a truth. But I believe the greater truth is us: we looked at that world, that heartless world that tears us up and turns us away from every hearth-fire, and we looked at the option of deceiving it into letting us in, the option of pretending to be something we weren’t in order to survive, and we said, to a person: NO. No, we will not lie; even in the face of starvation, of isolation, of loss, of torture, of death. No, even to escape the risk of a world that will never treat us right, we will not lie. We will not pretend. Not today; not again. At some point, if you are here, and reading this, and calling yourself a trans person or something like, no matter how many compromises and illusions you had to throw up in front of you to make it today alive, you eventually said ‘no more.’ You refused to lie, even if only to yourself.

I believe in trans people because, above all, we know something about the great and terrible worth of the truth. Not because we have paid that price – it has hit some of us harder, and some of us have come through nearly unscathed. Not because whatever we have suffered has made us more “special” than any other person. [But] because each of us is a person who looked out at a very dangerous, risky landscape and chose, eventually, to travel through it, because the truth mattered most. We know something about the truth; we know what it is worth. And we, as a people, surrounded by those who do not believe us and want us to pretend for them that they are right, chose that truth knowing it might cost us everything.

...That cannot be taken from us. It is more than our losses and more than our gains. It is more than the families we do or don’t have, the ideas we espouse, the places we stand...we chose the truth, knowing that that truth might not be kind to us, and we held tight to that truth while it burned on and on.

...I believe in trans people. I will believe in trans people until there is no more believing to do.”

-- little light, 2011¹

¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20120130194440/http://www.questioningtransphobia.com/?p=3631>

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DEDICATION

For my families – born and built.

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When I first moved to Ann Arbor to start my graduate education, I was a fundamentally different person. I had a different research agenda, a different career trajectory planned – even a different name! As my time at Michigan draws to a close, I feel that I owe a debt of gratitude to *all* who have aided and supported me in this process of “becoming.”

Karin Martin, Alex Murphy, and Cliff Lampe -- three of my esteemed committee members -- are owed many thanks for their generous (and generative) feedback on the dissertation itself, and for their support leading up to my defense. Karin Martin helped to supervise not only my dissertation process, but also my “publishable paper” defense (Michigan’s answer to a candidacy thesis) back in 2016 -- a defense of the piece that ultimately became the third chapter of this dissertation. She assumed these responsibilities while simultaneously serving as department Chair (for not one, but *two* consecutive terms) and shepherding our department through an unprecedented global pandemic. She models compassion, patience, and *calm* in ways that have served as great inspiration to me (both this year, and in all the years before). Alex Murphy offered excellent guidance, both methodological and theoretical; without her generosity and stewardship, the defense would have been unable to proceed. Cliff Lampe -- my cognate member -- has provided extensive and valuable feedback not only on the dissertation itself (and on the academic job market), but also on some of the alt-ac and non-ac venues that might make use of my social media expertise. All three of them are due my extensive thanks!

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While my dissertation committee members have held the most direct influence over this document, others are due thanks, too -- certainly more than can be named here. Thanks to Renee Anspach, who planted the original seed for this dissertation back when I was doing pilot interviews in her advanced qualitative methods seminar; Carla Pfeffer, Sarah Fenstermaker, and Doni Loseke, who offered thoughtful commentary and feedback on the paper that eventually became Chapter #3; Jo Reger, who shepherded Chapter #3 through publication at *Gender & Society* (and to Amy Stone, Val Jenness, stef shuster, and Laurel Westbrook, who served as staunch and much-valued advocates of this paper during the controversy that ensued surrounding its release); and to D'Lane Compton and Amy Stone (again!) for their excellent feedback on the paper that became Chapter #6. I also owe my thanks to Jason Owen-Smith and John Hollingsworth, who served as valuable long-term research mentors throughout my time at Michigan, and whose exceptional coaching in qualitative and ethnographic methods has done much to shape this dissertation process.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS, ABBREVIATIONS, AND SPECIAL TERMINOLOGY

AFAB = “assigned female at birth”; sometimes abbreviated “DFAB” (designated female at birth).

Affordances = The properties of a feature, object, or social environment that permit social actions. For example, the deployment of hashtags on sites like Twitter and Tumblr can be seen as “affording” the rapid collation of related images or texts.

Agender = A term used to describe a person with *no* gender identity; a person who experiences themselves as being void of gender, or who does not experience gender at all. People that identify as agender may or may not also identify as non-binary and/or as trans.

Allosexual = A person that experiences sexual attraction; a person that is *not* **asexual**. Sometimes shortened to “allo” (just as “asexual” is sometimes shortened to “ace”).

Alt-Right = Short for “alternative right”; a “set of far-right ideologies, groups, and individuals whose core belief is that ‘white identity’ is under attack by multicultural forces using ‘political correctness’ and ‘social justice’ to undermine white people and ‘their’ civilization.”²

AMAB = “assigned male at birth”; sometimes abbreviated “DMAB” (designated male at birth).

Ambient Affiliation = Affiliations or linkages between social media users (whether real or implied) suggested by shared usage of hashtags, shared interests, and/or common network ties; “affiliation that is directly inferred, rather than involving direct engagement between group members” (Zappavigna 2011).³

Archive of Our Own = A popular online fan-fiction community known in particular for its provision of adult (and, in particular, adult *queer*) content.

Aromantic = A term used to describe a person that does not experience romantic attraction, or that has limited interest in romantic relationships. Just like **asexual** identities, **aromantic** identities occupy a spectrum; a person that identifies as aromantic may still experience romantic attraction to particular people, in particular ways, or under particular sets of circumstances. Aromantic people may or may not be interested in sexual expression, and may belong to any sexual orientation or gender identity group.

² Southern Poverty Law Center. (2021) “Alt-Right.” Retrieved on October 28, 2021 (<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alt-right>).

³ Zappavigna, Michele. (2011) “Ambient Affiliation: A Linguistic Perspective on Twitter.” *New Media & Society* 13(5): 788-806.

Asexual (also “Ace”) = A term used to describe a person that does not experience sexual attraction. “Asexual” is an umbrella term, encapsulating a variety of identities that fall along the asexual spectrum (including **demisexual** identities). While some asexual people experience no sexual attraction of any kind (or are actively repulsed by sexuality), other asexual people may experience sexual attraction contextually, under particular types of circumstances or with particular partners. Others may actively participate in sexual *behavior*, even in the absence of sexual attraction. They may or may not also identify as heterosexual/heteroromantic, gay/lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or queer.

BBS = “Bulletin Board System”; an early digital messaging system (prevalent throughout the 1980s and early 1990s) that enabled users connected to the BBS server to exchange messages with one another.

BDSM = A circular acronym referring to “bondage and discipline,” “domination and submission,” and “sadism and masochism.” Those who practice BDSM may be involved in any of a wide range of sexual practices involving a dominant/submissive dynamic, power exchange, humiliation or degradation, the use of devices to restrain or inflict pain upon participants, and other types of fetish play.

Bigender = A term used to describe a person with two distinct gender identities; for instance, a person that identifies both as a man and as a woman (either simultaneously or interchangeably). People that identify as bigender may or may not also identify as non-binary and/or as trans.

Bi Lesbian = A term used to describe a person who identifies or self-describes as lesbian, but experiences sexual attraction to people of multiple genders (i.e., not “just” women).

Bisexual = A term used to describe a person that experiences sexual or romantic attraction both to people of their own gender, and to people of another gender. Sometimes used to describe individuals attracted to those on “both sides” of the gender binary (i.e., to men and women).

Body Project = Any attempt to “construct and maintain a coherent and viable sense of self-identity through attention to the body, particularly the body’s surface.”

Bottom Surgery = A colloquialism used to describe gender-affirming surgical procedures focused on the genital area (e.g., hysterectomy, metoidioplasty and/or phalloplasty for trans men; orchiectomy and/or vaginoplasty for trans women).

Butch/Femme = These terms are used exclusively within the context of lesbian/Sapphic relationships, and refer to a specific relationship dynamic wherein one partner adopts a more masculine style of self-presentation, and the other partner adopts a feminine one. These terms carry a particular historical significance and are *not* interchangeable with “masc” or “fem.”

Callout = To publicly critique a person on social media for their presentation, language, or behavior. Callouts are sometimes deployed to call particular users to account, requesting an apology or a change in their behavior. Callouts may also be deployed to encourage community members to shun or discredit a user that has violated community mores.

Cancelling/Cancellation = To publicly disavow a user; to call for a user’s expulsion from the community, or for other users to sever ties with the offender based on their behavior. Cancelling is generally treated as a method of “last resort,” reserved for those whose behavior is flagrant, persistent, or malicious enough to be viewed as beyond remediation.

Chest Binder = A compression undergarment worn by some AFAB trans and non-binary people, meant to reduce the appearance of breast tissue.

Cis(gender) = A term used to describe a person whose gender identity corresponds directly to the sex category they were assigned at birth. A cisgender man is an **AMAB** person who identifies as a man. A cisgender woman is an **AFAB** person who identifies as a woman.

Cis-Het = A term used to describe a person that is *both* **cisgender** and **heterosexual**.

Cissexism = Gender-based prejudice directed towards transgender and non-binary people by cisgender people. Like other forms of sexism, cissexism can be expressed *interactionally* (in the form of harassment, violence, microaggressions, or ignorance directed towards TNB+ people), or it can be enacted at the *institutional* level (both through the orientation of core social systems around the gender binary, and through the implementation of policies and procedures that serve to marginalize TNB+ people).

Closed Group = A Facebook group where access is controlled by group moderators. These groups appear in Facebook searches, but only current members can view group content or see which users are active in the community. Membership in these groups is by application, and applicants must be vetted and approved by moderators before they become eligible to participate.

Compulsory Heterosexuality = The theory that within the social context of heteropatriarchy, women (in every culture) are compelled to assert an innate preference for romantic and erotic relationships with men, leading them to devalue intimate connections to other women. Attributed to Adrienne Rich (1980)⁴.

Context Collapse = The flattening or integration of multiple audiences into a single social context (e.g., on social media); when people (and norms) from different settings meet (Marwick & boyd 2011).⁵

Cuck = A derogatory term used in some alt-right and incel spaces online to refer to (A) a weak or submissive man, or (B) a person with moderate or progressive politics (e.g., an “SJW”). Derived from the term “cuckold.”

Deadname = One’s birth name, or the name that one used prior to social transition.

⁴ Rich, Adrienne C. (1981) *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*. London, UK: Onlywomen Press.

⁵ Marwick, Alice E. and danah boyd. (2011) “‘I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately’: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience.” *New Media & Society* 13(1): 114-133.

Deadnaming = To be acknowledged by one's birth name, or the name that one used prior to social transition.

Demiboy/Demigirl = See **demigender**.

Demigender (also Demiboy/Demigirl) = A term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns *partially* or *contextually* -- but not *completely* -- with an established gender category. For instance, a *demiboy* is a person who partially identifies as a man or as masculine, regardless of their assigned sex at birth. People with identities along the demigender spectrum may -- but do not always -- also identify as non-binary and/or as trans.

Demisexual = A term used to describe a person that experiences sexual attraction *contextually*, or who only experiences such attraction under certain social conditions. Many demisexual people assert that they experience sexual attraction only in the presence of an established, intense emotional connection (i.e., that they are not interested in "one night stands" or casual sex). Demisexual identities are considered part of the asexuality spectrum. People that identify as demisexual may or may not also identify as heterosexual/heteroromantic, as gay/lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or queer.

Detransition = To cease interventions that a person has undertaken to effect medical or social transition (for example, to stop taking hormones), to undertake new surgical or medical procedures in an effort to "reverse" the effects of medical transition (for example, getting breast implants after undergoing masculinizing chest reconstruction), to resume use of a previously-discarded name or pronouns, or to desist from identifying as TNB+.

Digital Footprint = The information and representations of self that persist on the Internet as a result of a user's online activity (for example, social media profiles that are no longer regularly updated or accessed, but have not been intentionally removed; photos of a user that have been shared to another's profile, or content that other users have reblogged/shared/retweeted; etc).

"Dirty Delete" = To remove online content following a "callout" or request for accountability, in an effort to prevent other people from piling on (for example, deleting a post that another user decried as offensive rather than extending an apology).

Doxxing = The practice of disclosing a user's identifiable information (for example, their legal name, location/address, or place of employment) publicly on social media, generally for the purpose of publicly shaming the victim or rendering them a target of harassment or violence.

E = estrogen or estradiol; estrogenic hormone replacement therapy for transgender women and some AMAB non-binary people

Enby = A slang term for a non-binary person; derived from the phonetic pronunciation of the letters "N.B." (Members of many trans-focused online communities are discouraged from using the abbreviation "NB" to refer to non-binary people, as this abbreviation is also utilized in some POC communities to mean "non-Black.")

FART = “Feminism-Appropriating Reactionary Transphobe”; a tongue-in-cheek alternative to “TERF,” meant to conceptually disaggregate those with trans-exclusionary politics from feminism and feminists.

Fem = A term used to describe a person with a feminine style of self-presentation.

Finsta = a “fake” or secondary Instagram account, generally disconnected from a user’s primary online identity. Some young people create “Finstas” to share sensitive or secret information with their friends, while reducing the risk of parental discovery.

FTM = “Female-to-male”; an acronym used to describe trans men or transmasculine people. While now generally considered outdated, this term is still in use by some community members (particularly older members). Many of the online resources for trans people crafted in the 1990s and 2000s use this terminology.

Furry = A term used to describe an enthusiast for animal characters with human characteristics or personality traits; in particular, a person who dresses up as such a character, or who uses an anthropomorphic animal as an online avatar. While some “furries” express fetishistic or sexual interest in these kinds of performances, many do not. Many furries also identify as LGBTQ, as non-binary, or as trans.

Gender = a term used to describe a person’s relationship to the masculine/feminine binary, as designated by their *social* characteristics (e.g., style of dress; comportment; interests). Defined by the subjective experience and perceptions of the bearer (as contrasted against “sex,” which is typically externally assigned).

Gender-Critical = A term used to describe the politics of feminists with anti-transgender or trans-exclusionary beliefs. See also **TERF**.

Gender Dysphoria = Feelings of sadness, anger, or anxiety associated with performing a particular gender role; a sense of unease, disjuncture, or mismatch between one’s biological sex and one’s experience of gender.

Gender Euphoria = Feelings of excitement, happiness, or relief associated with performing a particular gender role; a sense of fulfillment or delight that sets in when presenting as (or recognized as belonging to) a particular gender category.

Genderfluid = A term used to describe a person whose gender identity fluctuates, changing from moment to moment or from context to context. People that identify as genderfluid may or may not also identify as non-binary and/or as trans.

Gender Non-Conforming = A term used to describe a person whose presentation, identity, or behavior violates gender norms. Historically, this term has been used to describe both transgender people *and* cisgender people with unconventional or ambiguous gender presentation (e.g., butch lesbians; drag performers; “tomboys,” etc.).

Genderqueer = A term used to describe a person whose gender identity challenges or defies social norms. People that identify as genderqueer may or may not also identify as non-binary and/or as trans.

Gray Ace = An identity that falls along the **asexuality** spectrum. People that identify as “gray ace” may describe themselves as *partially*, *contextually*, or *predominantly* asexual, but experience sexual attraction to particular types of people or under certain social conditions.

He/Him Lesbian = A term used to describe a person who identifies or self-describes as lesbian, but also uses masculine pronouns and/or identifies (in whole or in part) as masculine or male.

Heteropatriarchy = A social or political system wherein cisgender, heterosexual males are granted social status and social privileges that transcend those extended both to non-cis/non-het males and to people of other genders (e.g., women; non-binary people).

HRT = Hormone replacement therapy (generally, testosterone therapy for AFAB trans and non-binary people; spironolactone and estrogen for AMAB people).

Identity Challenge = Any interaction or encounter where an actor’s identity claims are questioned, contested, or denied. Online, these types of challenges can take a variety of forms, including open challenges (e.g., “you don’t look like an X”; “you can’t say that you’re an X and then do Y”), callouts, cancellations, identity-policing interactions that foreclose access to spaces and groups, anonymous “asks” or comments (on sites like Tumblr), etc.

Incel = an “involuntary celibate”; a member of an online community (generally comprised of young cisgender men) who “consider themselves unable to attract women sexually; typically associated with views that are hostile toward women and toward men who are sexually active.”⁶

Intersex = A term used to describe a person whose physical characteristics defy binary sex attribution. Intersexuality can result from any of a broad spectrum of physiological conditions (e.g., disorders of hormone production or reception; malformation of the bladder, rectum, or genitals; chromosomal abnormalities), and such conditions may be diagnosed either at birth/in infancy or later in the life course. While some trans and non-binary people are also intersex, intersex people have no inherent relationship or connection to transness or to trans identity, and many intersex people ultimately identify as neither queer nor trans.

IRC = “Internet Relay Chat”; an early instant messaging system favored throughout the 1990s. IRC enables synchronous discussions among multiple participants, and IRC clients can be organized to offer specific *channels* for discourse that focus on particular topics (unlike BBS).

Lithromantic = A romantic orientation on the aromantic spectrum. A person who is lithromantic experiences romantic attraction in *theory*, but not in *practice*; they may develop crushes or desire a romantic connection with others, but find that their attraction wanes once the relationship is actualized or the affection becomes reciprocated.

⁶ Oxford English Dictionary (2021). Retrieved on October 28, 2021 (<https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>).

Masc = A term used to describe a person with a masculine style of self-presentation.

Medical Transition = To change one's *physical* presentation to more closely correspond to one's gender identity (typically through interventions like hormone replacement therapy or surgery).

Misgendering = To be referenced with an inappropriate gender label or inappropriate pronouns (e.g., to be called "she" as a man or "he" as a woman).

MOGAI = "Marginalized Orientations, Genders, and Intersex"; a catch-all acronym used to describe marginalized sexual and gender identities.

Monosexual(ity) = To be gay, lesbian, or heterosexual; to express sexual interest in people that belong to only one gender group, exclusively. Often contrasted against "plurisexuality" and "asexuality."

MTF = "Male-to-female"; an acronym used to describe trans women or transfeminine people. While now generally considered outdated, this term is still in use by some community members (particularly older members). Many of the online resources for trans people crafted in the 1990s and 2000s use this terminology.

Neopronouns = Sets of pronouns *other than* he/him/his, she/her/hers, or they/them/theirs. Some neopronouns mimic more conventional pronoun sets (e.g., ey/em/eirs; xe/hir/hirs). Others bear no relationship to established pronoun sets, and are rooted instead in nouns or adjectives related to the bearer's identity (e.g., "star/stars/starself"; "bun/buns/bunself"; etc). May also be referred to as **xenopronouns**.

Networked Public = "Networked publics are publics that are restructured by networked technologies. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice. Networked publics serve many of the same functions as other types of publics – they allow people to gather for social, cultural, and civic purposes, and they help people connect with a world beyond their close friends and family. While networked publics share much in common with other types of publics, the ways in which technology structures them introduces distinct affordances that shape how people engage with these environments. The properties of bits – as distinct from atoms – introduce new possibilities for interaction. As a result, new dynamics emerge that shape participation...in essence, the architecture of a particular environment matters, and the architecture of networked publics is shaped by their affordances." (boyd 2010)⁷

Non-Binary = A term used to describe a person whose gender identity transcends the male/female binary. Sometimes treated as an "umbrella" term, encapsulating a number of gender identities existing "between" binary gender categories, "outside" of these categories, or "beyond" the scope of these categories altogether (including identity labels like genderfluid, agender, bigender, or

⁷ boyd, danah. (2010) "Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications." Pp. 39-58 in *The Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, edited by Zizi Papacharissi. New York, NY: Routledge.

genderqueer). People that identify as non-binary contextualize their relationships to the gender binary in a variety of different ways, and may or may not also describe themselves as trans.

Otherkin = A term used to describe a person that identifies — in whole or in part, contextually or in all situations — as a television/theatrical/literary character, a non-human creature (e.g., a demon; a fairy; a vampire), or an object. Otherkin feel a sense of kinship or psychic alignment with specific non-human entities, or believe that their own physical forms do not adequately represent or encompass their “true” spiritual nature.

Pansexual = A term used to describe a person that experiences sexual or romantic attraction to people with many different types of gender identity. Originally conceived as a “trans-inclusive” alternative to the label “bisexual.” Use of this label is now heavily contested, both within the trans community and by other cohorts of queer people.

PCOS = polycystic ovarian syndrome; an endocrine disorder resulting in imbalanced androgen production, irregular menstruation, infertility, and the formation of ovarian cysts in AFAB people.

Plurisexual(ity) = To be bisexual, pansexual, omnisexual, or to express sexual interest in people that belong to two or more gender groups. Often contrasted against “monosexuality” and “asexuality.”

Polyamory = The practice of maintaining romantic or sexual relationships with multiple partners concurrently (in general, with the full knowledge and consent of all parties involved). While some people perceive their inclination toward polyamory as a core component of their sexual identity (finding it difficult or undesirable to maintain monogamous relationships), others treat polyamory as a sexual *practice*, and may enter into either monogamous or polyamorous relationship dynamics (depending on their needs/interests at the time).

PSP = PlayStation Portable; a handheld, portable gaming system made by Sony (similar to Nintendo’s Game Boy).

Queer = A term used to describe a person whose sexual or romantic attractions cannot be described or bounded; a person whose sexual or romantic attractions defy social convention. Queer is often used as an “umbrella” term, encapsulating many people who do not identify as exclusively straight and/or people who have non-binary or gender-expansive identities. This term was previously used as a slur, but is being actively reclaimed by many within LGBTQ spaces.

Receipts = Screenshots, copies of e-mails/text messages, and other “evidence” of a social media user’s wrongdoing that can be leveraged to support a **callout** or **cancellation**.

Sapphic = A term used to describe women (cis or trans) who are predominantly attracted to other women or non-binary people. Sometimes used interchangeably with **lesbian**.

Sea-Lioning = A form of trolling or harassment “[in] which a participant in a debate or online discussion pesters the other participant with disingenuous questions [or repeated requests for

evidence] under the guise of sincerity, hoping to erode the patience or goodwill of the target to the point where they appear unreasonable.” (Merriam-Webster 2021)

Secret Group = A Facebook group that can be accessed by invitation only. These groups do not appear in Facebook searches; people can only access them if they are formally invited by an existing member of the group.

Sex = a term used to describe a person’s relationship to the male/female binary, as designated by the presence (or absence) of particular *physiological* attributes (such as chromosomes, genitalia/gonads, or secondary sex characteristics). Assigned to individuals by healthcare personnel (as contrasted against “gender,” which is self-defined and organized around self-perception).

SJW = a “social justice warrior”; a derogatory term used to describe those that appear overly invested in identity politics.

Social Transition = To change one’s *social* presentation to more closely correspond to one’s gender identity (e.g., by changing one’s name, changing style of dress, or using new pronouns).

Spiro = spironolactone; a “hormone blocker” prescribed to some transgender women and AMAB non-binary people to inhibit the production of testosterone

Swatting = An online harassment tactic in which users intentionally manipulate emergency services (for instance, SWAT personnel or EMS) into dispatching a response team to another person’s address. The dispatch is often triggered by user-issued false reports of serious law enforcement emergencies --- such as a bomb threat or a hostage situation -- or medical emergencies, such as reporting that a person is suicidal and may be armed. Swatting carries a high risk of violence, particularly to the person targeted. See also **doxxing**.

T = testosterone; androgenic hormone replacement therapy for transgender men and some AFAB non-binary people

TERF = “Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist”; an acronym used to describe feminists that deny the existence of (or are actively antagonistic towards) transgender people, particularly trans women. While “TERF” is a term widely used among trans people to describe feminists with anti-trans politics, some TERFs prefer to describe themselves/their beliefs using the term “gender-critical.”

TNB+ = An acronym meaning “trans, gender non-conforming, etc.”; a generic term used to refer to all non-cisgender people, regardless of their chosen identity label.

Top Surgery = A colloquialism used to describe gender-affirming surgical procedures focused on the chest area (e.g., mastectomy for trans men; breast augmentation for trans women).

Transfeminine = A term used to describe a transgender person that aligns themselves more closely with femininity than with masculinity. Transfeminine people may or may not identify as “women” (or as non-binary).

Trans[gender] = A term used to describe a person whose gender identity does not correspond to the sex category they were assigned to at birth. Typically, a binary-aligned transgender man is a man that was assigned “female” at birth. A binary-aligned transgender woman is a woman that was assigned “male” at birth.

Transmasculine = A term used to describe a transgender person that aligns themselves more closely with masculinity than with femininity. Transmasculine people may or may not identify as “men” (or as non-binary).

Transmedicalist = A person who advocates for the medicalization of trans identity, or who perceives transness as a medical/biological “defect”; a person who perceives gender dysphoria as integral and essential to the experience of trans identity.

Transsexual = A term sometimes used to describe a person that has medically transitioned, taking hormones or undergoing surgery in order to “change sex.” Now considered outdated (and, by many, derogatory), this term continues to be embraced by some older members of the trans community (e.g., Kate Bornstein), and some of the younger community members profiled here invoke this language in an effort to reclaim it.

Troll = A person who posts inflammatory, insincere, misleading, or off-topic commentary in an online community or on a social networking site, with the expressed purpose of baiting or provoking readers into accepting misinformation or displaying a hostile emotional response.

“Truscum” = A (derogatory) term used by some trans and non-binary people to refer to transmedicalists, or to people who contend that gender dysphoria should be viewed as a prerequisite to claiming trans identity.

“Tucute” = A (derogatory) term used by some transmedicalists to refer to *non*-transmedicalists, or to refer to people who contend that gender dysphoria should *not* be viewed as a prerequisite to claiming trans identity. Many “tucutes” argue that gender dysphoria and trans identities should be conceptually disaggregated, and that gender *euphoria* should instead be centered as the defining characteristic of trans experience.

Tumblr Apocalypse (also “Tumblrpalooza”; “Tumblrgeddon”): In November of 2018, Tumblr enacted an “adult content ban,” using bots to purge content flagged as “adult” or sexual from the site. This decision -- while wildly controversial, for a variety of reasons -- proved to be *especially* inflammatory for TNB+ Tumblr users, many of whom had previously utilized the site as both (A) a source of trans-positive adult content, and (B) a resource for information regarding sexual health. Images and blog posts containing non-sexualized nudity (for instance, photographs of trans users’ surgical results) were unexpectedly deleted, and bots -- flagging content tagged with the word “trans” as potentially pornographic -- scrubbed trans-focused content from the site

en masse. Subsequently, many trans and gender non-conforming young people abandoned their use of Tumblr.⁸

UwU = A slang term derived from the letters U-w-U, which (when presented online) serve as an emoticon depicting a smiling face. Used to convey warm, happy, affectionate, or flirtatious feelings in online chat or text messages. Closely related to the emoticon OwO (used to convey surprise or excitement – a smiling face with wide-open eyes).

“Vanity” Gender = A highly-specific gender identity label; a gender identity label that is unlikely to be recognized by others (even other trans people) until explained/elaborated. For instance, descriptors like “arqoric,” “demifaeflux,” or “stargender” might be considered examples of “vanity” gender labels.⁹

WPATH = The World Professional Association of Transgender Health. WPATH is the organizing body responsible for producing the Standards of Care (SOC) for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender Non-Conforming People -- the clinical guidance used to govern patients’ access to gender-related care (e.g., HRT; surgical interventions).

Xenopronouns = See **neopronouns**.

⁸ I was lucky enough to be collecting data at the time that the “Tumblr Apocalypse” occurred, and so have some data that captures TNB+ young people’s immediate reactions to these events (as well as their decision-making regarding future participation in the space). While these data are being developed for publication separately, they are not addressed in this manuscript.

⁹ For details on these (and a full suite of other gender and sexual identity labels, along with their definitions), visit The MOGAI Wiki: <https://mogai.fandom.com/wiki/>.

ABSTRACT

Today's digitally-mediated "networked publics" (boyd 2014) afford users unprecedented opportunities to explore self-presentation, to learn about TNB+ identities (away from the prying eyes of parents), and to connect and forge community with others around the world. Online communities and social media sites offer TNB+ youth opportunities to craft representations of self that would be unintelligible in analog domains. So profound has been the impact of the Internet on TNB+ community building that some have hailed these online spaces as "utopian" in nature, asserting that the expansion and mobilization of today's TNB+ community could not have taken place without its influence (Giardina 2019).

In my own research with trans and non-binary young people, participants often spoke with great enthusiasm about their preferred trans-focused spaces online, asserting that they would not have found the courage to actualize their identities -- or, for that matter, even have come to *recognize* their identities -- without the resources these spaces provide. Yet, at the same time, these same participants emphatically *refuted* the "utopian" visions enshrined in the literature: while social media had enabled them to explore new identity labels and to connect with other trans people, it had also exposed them to waves of harassment and abuse, propagated both by cis-het Internet "trolls" and by other TNB+ people. Their responses paint a portrait of social media use as a double-edged sword, both a source of empowerment *and* a source of new interactional risks.

Drawing from a total of 67 in-depth interviews collected longitudinally from a cohort of 49 trans, non-binary, and otherwise gender-expansive young people (and coupled with textual analysis of their social media profiles), this research examines the strategies and tools that TNB+ young people leverage to construct, represent, and account for their gender identities online. Remaining “accountable” to gender online necessitates no small amount of creativity and adaptability on the part of social media users -- particularly those who disrupt gender norms. As users and their online audiences strive to negotiate the terms of what “authentic” gender identity narratives look like, open questions about which identity claims should be considered reliable incentivize intra-community factionalization and boundary policing. The structure and affordances of specific online communities have the potential to amplify these processes, in that many of the *very same features* that many trans users find most compelling — for instance, anonymity, the ability to construct trans-exclusive “safe spaces,” and decentralization of the body — may *also* increase users’ exposure to risk (for example, the risk of having one’s identity claims rejected online, or of being harassed or rejected by other users). In this dissertation, I assess the implications of these “double-edged” design choices for both (A) the identity projects of individual TNB+ users, and (B) coalition-building and community mobilization among TNB+ young people as a collective. I also discuss how these findings can be utilized to inform platform design, shaping the architecture of these online spaces in ways that support and protect TNB+ people.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Cameron (22, they/them)¹⁰: There's a phrase that we use called 'being online'...like, when someone is like, 'oh, she's so online.' It's [when] somebody is just very, you know — they won't shut up about the Internet...[And I think] trans people inherently being very 'online' people, a lot of the time, is because it's kind of in our heritage. [It's] our home.

In mid-2017, a half-page poster abstract appeared in the pages of the *Journal of Adolescent Health* -- a drop of rain, splattered on the page as a herald of the storm to come. Spearheaded by Dr. Lisa Littman, a practicing M.D. at the established Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, the study purported to describe a "new phenomenon" emerging among American adolescents -- in particular, adolescent "girls," or teens assigned female at birth -- that Littman had labeled "rapid-onset gender dysphoria": the "sudden" onset of gender dysphoria, reported by parents to be appearing "for the first time" around the age of puberty (instead of in early childhood, as proposed by many other culturally-endorsed accounts of trans identity; see Littman 2017)¹¹. The abstract in

¹⁰ The abbreviation "T/T" here is to indicate that Cameron uses the personal pronouns they, them, and theirs. In this dissertation, the abbreviation "T/T" will be used to signal that a respondent uses "they/them" pronouns, "S/H" to indicate "she/her," "H/H" to indicate "he/him," "H/T" to indicate "he/they" (denoting that the participant described both neutral *and* masculine pronouns as acceptable), "S/T" to indicate "she/they," or "I/I" to indicate "it/its" pronouns. (While a myriad of other personal pronouns exist, all project participants favored one of the six categories of pronouns described above.)

¹¹ As Chapter 4 discusses, onset of gender non-conforming behavior or gender dysphoria in early childhood is indeed a component of today's "dominant narrative" of trans identity, acknowledged in discussion with my own participants. However, it is worth mention that the DSM-V -- initially published in 2013, years ahead of Littman's article -- makes no mention of early childhood onset as a criterion for the diagnosis of gender dysphoria. (Similarly, no age of onset criterion was present in the DSM-IV.) The DSM-V describes the diagnostic guidelines for gender dysphoria as follows: "The DSM-V defines gender dysphoria in adolescents...as a marked incongruence between one's experienced/expressed gender and their assigned gender, lasting at least six months, as manifested by at least two of the following: (A) a marked incongruence between one's experience/expressed gender and primary and/or secondary sex characteristics (or in young adolescents, the anticipated secondary sex characteristics); (B) a

the *Journal of Adolescent Health* – a forerunner of the full-length article, which dropped in *PLoS One* just over a year later (Littman 2018a) -- explained:

Parents online are observed reporting their children experiencing a rapid onset of gender dysphoria appearing for the first time during or after puberty. They describe this development occurring in the context of being part of a peer group where one, multiple, or even all friends have developed gender dysphoria and come out as transgender during the same timeframe and/or an increase in social media/Internet use. (Littman 2017)

Dr. Littman’s contention is that we are now in the midst of a “trans epidemic” -- a moment in time where transgender and otherwise gender non-conforming young people are disclosing their identities at higher rates. While statistical and demographic data on transgender people are hard to come by, recent analyses suggest that the total population of trans Americans has roughly doubled in the past 10 years (Flores et al 2021), from roughly 0.3% of the population to 0.6% (about 1.4 million people in total). By far the greatest increase in LGBTQ identification has come about among young people, with some 15.9% (or roughly 1 in 6) Americans aged 18-23 now describing themselves as LGBTQ (and some 10% of these describing themselves as trans -- see Jones 2021). The demographic shift has been particularly pronounced for teens and young adults that identify as non-binary, genderfluid, or genderqueer -- identity labels that didn’t *exist* twenty years ago, to be claimed by Millennials or members of older age cohorts. Recent research from The Trevor Project suggests that some 25% -- 1 in 4 -- of young adults that identify as LGBQ *also* identify as

strong desire to be rid of one’s primary and/or secondary sex characteristics because of a marked incongruence with one’s experienced/expressed gender (or, in young adolescents, a desire to prevent the development of the anticipated secondary sex characteristics); (C) a strong desire for the primary and/or secondary sex characteristics of the other gender; (D) a strong desire to be of the other gender (or some alternative gender different from the assigned gender); (E) a strong desire to be treated as the other gender (or some alternative gender different from one’s assigned gender); (F) a strong conviction that one has the typical feelings and reactions of the other gender (or some alternative gender different from one’s assigned gender. In order to meet criteria for the diagnosis, the condition must also be associated with clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important aspects of functioning.” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

non-binary, with another 20% describing themselves as “questioning” their gender (Ennis 2021). As the cultural context around trans identities continues to evolve, claiming a trans or non-binary identity feels safer; coming out feels easier, more accessible; transition becomes a more tangible possibility, with actionable steps. For many TNB+ young people, these changes have been life-affirming. For Dr. Littman, however -- and for the transphobic parents she interviewed -- these changes spelled disaster.

Recruiting concerned mothers and fathers to participate through an assortment of “gender-critical” online fora (including the notoriously anti-trans 4thWaveNow.org¹² -- see Ashley 2020), Littman leverages a survey sample of 221 parent reports to build the claim that trans identities -- and, in particular, the trans or non-binary identities of young AFAB people -- are an artifact of online “social contagion.” She argues that by affording young people greater access to information about queer and trans identities and greater exposure to trans and gender non-conforming people, social networking technologies have enabled these identities to “spread” and proliferate, causing previously non-dysphoric young people to develop perceptions of themselves as gender dysphoric and motivating them to “cut ties” with unsupportive cisgender figures in their lives (Littman 2017). In a subsequent conference abstract describing the same sample (published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*), she credits the emergence of TNB+ young people to the (unspecified) “peer group dynamics” that prevail in trans-focused social media spaces, suggesting that:

In online reports, parents have described cluster outbreaks of gender dysphoria (GD). Their child appeared to rapidly develop a gender dysphoria and/or transgender identification in the context of a peer group where multiple members became gender dysphoric and/or transgender was identified around the same time; the child’s immersion in social media was often associated...[I find that] online peer group dynamics strongly suggest the

¹² <https://4thwavenow.com/tag/lisa-littman/>.

contribution of peer group and social media influences in the development of ROGD. (Littman 2018)

The fallout from these two publications -- among both cisgender and transgender people, and across the political spectrum -- was swift, fierce, and ultimately predictable. Trans scholars and other advocates of gender-affirming care for TNB+ young people pushed back against the release on a number of grounds, including that (1) the prevalence of adolescent gender dysphoria has remained largely stable at gender identity clinics in recent years (Arnoldussen et al 2020); (B) that the “growing availability and intelligibility of transgender identities” (Ashley 2020) have more to do with the rise in adolescent trans and non-binary identification than do social media; (C) that the piece was methodologically unsound, building a causal argument from data insufficient to demonstrate causation and rooting its analysis in the reports of concerned (and gender-critical) parents, rather than in the reports of trans youth; and (D) that the work thoroughly discredited the identity claims of TNB+ youth, promoting further stigmatization and institutional discrimination towards an already vulnerable cohort of young people. The work was condemned so savagely that *PLoS One* was moved to publish a correction (Littman 2019), followed by a formal statement of apology (Heber 2019).

However, by this point, the damage had long been done. References to “social contagion” in the literature on trans youth increased dramatically following the release of Littman’s publications (Ashley 2020; see also Marchiano 2017, Bailey & Blanchard 2017). Healthcare providers that had previously discredited “conversion”-type therapies for trans youth are now being found to endorse their return (Zucker et al 2016; see also Ashley 2020). The impact upon the general public has been even more profound (both in scope, and in consequence). A few months after the release of Littman’s second publication, the journalist Abigail Shrier penned an op-ed in

the *Wall Street Journal* that praised Littman's research, citing the "burden of mothers" tasked with supporting these children: "...Under the influence of testosterone and the spell of transgression, ROGD daughters grow churlish and aggressive. Under the banner of civil rights, they assume the moral high ground...as ROGD daughters rage against the biology they hope to defy, their mothers bear its burden, evincing its maternal instinct -- the stubborn refusal to abandon their young" (Shrier 2019). From this editorial was born a book-length rendition of the same argument, entitled *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*. As the title suggests, Shrier's tome is alarmist, comparing self-identification as trans to immersion in a "cult" (p. 4). Herein she, too, points to social media as a driver of the "trans epidemic," asserting:

...Teenagers are in the midst of what academic psychologist Jonathan Haidt has called a 'mental health crisis' -- evincing record levels of anxiety and depression...Why the sudden spike in anxiety, depression, self-harm? 'Social media,' was Haidt's immediate reply...the phenomenon sweeping teenage girls...originates not in traditional gender dysphoria, but in videos found on the Internet. It represents mimicry inspired by Internet gurus...we cheer as teenage girls with no history of dysphoria steep themselves in a radical gender ideology...[and] peers and therapists and teachers and Internet heroes egg these girls on. But here, the cost of so much youthful indiscretion is not a piercing or tattoo. It's closer to a pound of flesh. Some small proportion of the population will always be transgender -- but perhaps the current craze will not always lure troubled young girls with no history of gender dysphoria, enlisting them in a lifetime of hormone dependency and disfiguring surgeries. If this is a social contagion, society -- perhaps -- can arrest it. (Shrier 2020, p. 5-6).

Like Littman's work, Shrier's book has been widely disparaged by trans advocates (Boylan 2019; Beedle 2020) and by healthcare and psychiatric personnel working with trans youth (Eckert 2021; Lovell 2021; Yurcaba 2021) -- so much so, in fact, that Shrier was moved to add in an "Author's Note" as a prologue in the paperback edition of the text, condemning those who would try to censor her (Shrier 2021). Yet, in spite of -- or perhaps *because* of -- this negative press, *Irreversible Damage* was named one of the best books of 2021 by both *The Sunday Times* and *The*

Economist, and has a 4.6 star average review (out of 5) on Amazon (with a whopping 85% of reviewers offering five stars -- easily overwhelming the 6% who offered one-star reviews). The reviews are awash with praise from concerned parents, living in fear of being trapped with a transgender child:



Annette K. Blanas

★★★★★ **Finally! A book that discusses this issue from a different perspective.**

Reviewed in the United States on July 2, 2020

Verified Purchase

I am so happy to finally find someone willing to say something that makes sense. This book could have been written from my experiences with my daughter. I felt like I was losing my mind, nothing happening made sense. Thank you for writing this amazing book.

1,667 people found this helpful

★★★★★ **Eye opening - critical for all parents to read**

Reviewed in Canada on August 6, 2020

Verified Purchase

I became aware of this topic in the last six months as I saw this social contagion hit my daughter's school and grade (9th). I had never thought twice about it, was fully supportive of trans rights and LGBTQ rights, and always considered myself left-leaning and a lifelong liberal.

But I was floored to discover this phenomenon: teenage girls SELF-diagnosing themselves with gender dysphoria and then increasingly and very quickly being given life-altering hormones and even surgery to deal with it. It is absolutely shocking when you delve into the issue. Affirmation is considered the only acceptable option.

Figure 1.1: Reviews from Amazon.com offer praise for Shrier's *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*.

As was also roundly predicted, the emergence of this discourse on ROGD has had striking consequences for trans young people. In the first six months following the publication of Shrier's book, the panic that surged through trans-focused Facebook groups seemed overwhelming,

spurring post after anxious post. One group member¹³ wrote, “my mother found [Shrier’s book] and has been totally sucked in by it. It’s driving me crazy...she says I’m not “willing to debate” my gender dysphoria with her, even though I said I’d gladly take her with me to get a second opinion...instead, she wants me to take a blood test to check my chromosomes, and to get trauma therapy.” Another post inquired, “my partner read the book *Irreversible Damage*, and now he thinks I want to become a man because I was traumatized by being a girl...he says my depression and social anxiety aren’t being treated and I’ve confused those things for being trans. What can I do to help him understand?” In the comments beneath, another group member lamented, “Oh, no -- nobody tell my mom about this!”

I started writing this dissertation because I wanted to give young trans and gender non-conforming social media users a voice in this narrative. I wanted to offer them a platform to push back against Lisa Littman’s arguments -- to speak, at last, as members of the population that Shrier and Littman have been writing *about*, but have seldom deigned to talk *to*. And my participants did indeed push back against this framing of their experiences -- in particular, the argument about “social contagion” and the “spread” of trans identification from peer to peer. Some were openly amused. Participant Avery (22, they/them), for instance, laughed, “I haven’t read this article, but still, like -- I’ve basically read this article?... like, it’s almost like we [TNB+ people] have had similar experiences! Go figure that we all arrive at similar conclusions. It’s almost like like-minded people would join communities of like-minded people, or something.” Ramona (20, they/he), too, laughed as they scoffed, “I mean, shoot - they said the same thing about gay kids in the ‘90s. ‘Where are all these gay kids coming from?’...or, shit, if you want to even diverge from gender

¹³ Direct quotes drawn from Facebook pages -- even those taken from private groups -- are readily searchable online. While the content of these posts has been preserved, all quotes presented in this section have been intentionally paraphrased, with language changed to protect posters' privacy.

and sexuality entirely, we could talk about autism spectrum disorder...it's like Alex Jones. 'The water's turning the frickin' frogs gay!'"

Similarly, with respect to social contagion, many attested to the reality that teens can neither come out as trans nor pursue transition without first *recognizing* trans identity as a tangible possibility, making it *appear* as though exposure to trans people has "triggered" some kind of contagion effect. As Bradley (18, he/they) explained:

Social media is exposing young people to this identity, and they're figuring it out sooner....people are like, 'oh, why is everyone just now coming out?' And it's like, 'because it's widely known? It's coming more into the public eye, and people are being more open about it, and have the language for it now?' ...I know with, like, figuring out my own identity, I went to social media to go figure it out, and to have people to talk to, because even though I was confused, and I didn't have the words for it, there were some people who did. So they didn't 'influence me' in the sense of, they told me [who I was] -- they helped me *understand* what I was going through. And even if I did 'catch on' to their language...I slowly developed, and came up with my own terms for it, and things like that...[but] if I 'caught on' to everything that happened on social media, it would be a complete disaster. I don't know what would happen.

Yet, while my participants rebuked Shrier and Littman's characterizations of their identities as fraudulent and condemned the argument that they had adopted their identities to fit in with peers, they were slower to critique Shrier and Littman's arguments regarding the influence of social media. In fact, many were quite outspoken about the role that social media had played in helping them to recognize their identities as trans or gender non-conforming, to convey those identities to others (both online, and in their offline lives), and to refine their presentation of self. They were often keenly aware of how their experiences on social media had shaped them, sometimes asserting directly that their growth would have taken another trajectory in the absence of these experiences. Participant Ramona (20, they/he), for instance, stated that "what we're trying to do, at the end of the day, is just live our best and most authentic lives, and I think that social

media is genuinely an important piece of that for this generation -- for these two youngest generations. ‘Cause if it hadn’t been for social media, I wouldn’t have known I was trans or gay.’ Kai (22, they/he/she), a queer agender person, explained, “If it wasn’t for the Internet, I’d still be straight...I wouldn’t be anywhere that I was today, if it wasn’t for [social media].” Cameron, a non-binary lesbian (22, they/them), was even more forthright in their assertion, delightedly proclaiming, “Tumblr made me trans!” While they decried Shrier and Littman’s claims that social media had *caused* their identities, they strongly affirmed the importance of social media in helping them to *recognize* and to *actualize* their identities. As Jo (22, they/she) explained, “I can see why they [might] draw that conclusion...[but] I think it’s more like correlation, not causation. Like, they’re looking at it right, but they’re drawing the wrong conclusion.”

While the Internet and social media have not *created* trans and non-binary young people , they *have* done a great deal to lay a foundation for their emergence -- both now, and in the past. However, while the Internet is undoubtedly (and always has been) an empowering, generative, and affirming space for TNB+ people, it is *not* a space that enables people to “escape” or evade gender; nor is it a space void of negativity, marginalization, or social risk. The Internet has created a set of cultural conditions that have *facilitated* the emergence and the community-building efforts of trans and non-binary young people, but it has *also* created a set of cultural conditions that are actively *impeding* the growth of such young people -- both with respect to the political mobilization of this rapidly-expanding community, and with respect to the identity projects and self-perceptions of individual users. More insidiously, the features and affordances of today’s social media platforms that have worked most directly to attract and empower trans young people are often the *very same features and affordances* responsible for producing conditions which undermine them. In this dissertation, I elaborate the “double-edged” nature of these affordances for TNB+ social media

users, and assess the implications of these design choices for both (A) the identity projects of individual users, and (B) coalition-building and community mobilization among TNB+ young people as a collective.

Identity Formation in Networked Publics

It is little secret that today's teens and young adults spend significant amounts of time online. Users between the ages of 18 and 30 comprise the core growth demographic for a majority of mainstream social media platforms (including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter), and many users in this age group describe themselves as being online "almost constantly" (Anderson & Jiang 2018). Available reports now suggest that the average American college student may now spend anywhere from six (Twenge 2019) to nine (Rideout & Robb 2019) hours a day online. As social media use becomes increasingly pervasive — in the classroom (Rogers 2013), in the workplace (Lampe & Ellison 2016), and as a tool for managing intimate relationships (Lenhart & Duggan 2014) — there seems little reason to expect that the centrality of social media in the lives of youth will diminish in the years to come.

As an effect of this proliferation, the majority of young people now experience the work of cultivating an online presence as a social and occupational inevitability (boyd 2014). As constructing an online identity has become increasingly central to managing one's social life, this work has also become increasingly key to the project of defining the self. Immersed in Internet's "networked public" (boyd 2010), today's social media users are not simply "networked" together in the sense of being *connected* to one another online: social networking technologies have fundamentally reshaped how identity formation and group socialization operate for young adults, and in a variety of ways. As David Buckingham (2008) argues, today's young people are

“produced by technology...it provides new ways of forming identity, and hence new forms of personhood; and by offering communication with different aspects of the self, it enables young people to relate to the world and to others in more powerful ways” (p. 14).

Social media’s ability to provoke this kind of reflexive self-awareness is one of the capacities that makes it so fruitful for analyzing identity construction. Late adolescence and young adulthood have been classically regarded as periods of unusually intense and self-reflexive identity work (Herring 2008; Erikson 1968). This life stage is viewed as a time of dramatic physical, emotional, and social change: the biological changes associated with puberty and sexual maturity, gradual assimilation into adult institutional contexts (as young adults seek first employment, begin to live independently, and forge new types of intimate relationships), and the myriad psychological changes that accompany these transitions. These elements converge and crescendo in early adulthood, making questions of self-identity (“Who do I think I am?”) and social identity (“Who am I to others?”) especially salient for those navigating this stage of life (Mead 1934). The centrality of these same questions to the social “project” of constructing online identities makes young adults’ use of social media a generative context for exploring questions related to identity formation, disclosure, and change over time.

These kinds of identity projects take on a special salience and urgency for LGBTQ+ youth, making social media an even more valuable lifeline. Thus, while young people from *all* backgrounds are becoming increasingly active online, the available evidence suggests that LGBTQ+ young people are *disproportionately* active, even relative to others in their age cohort. In an era that has witnessed both the rapid disintegration of queer public spaces, such as ‘gayborhoods’ and gay bars (Cavalcante 2019; Ghaziani 2014) and the erosion of safe, parentally-supervised spaces for the public socialization of youth (boyd 2014), the Internet has risen to

prominence as a central hub of social activity for queer and questioning young people around the world (Fox & Ralston 2016). LGBTQ+ people leverage social networking sites to conceptualize, construct, and manage their personal identities (Fox & Ralston 2016; Cooper & Dzara 2010), to plan and rehearse coming out experiences (Duguay 2016; Fox & Warber 2015), to connect with valuable social support (Baams et al 2011), and to share information and resources with other users (Renninger 2015; Cavalcante 2019), facilitating political mobilization (Cooper & Dzara 2010). In essence, these spaces provide LGBTQ+ young people with opportunities to explore self-presentation that enable them to feel safe, comfortable, and in control (Cavalcante 2019).

Trans and gender non-conforming young people are the most active online of all, outpacing even other cohorts of youth under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. In one of the first policy briefs to be compiled *specifically* on the social media use of trans and non-binary youth – now almost a decade old -- Palmer and colleagues (2013) found that TNB+ teens and young adults spent an average of six hours per day using social media, *in addition* to any time spent accessing the Internet at others' behest (for instance, at work, during school hours, or to complete homework assignments). This data was collected just as smartphones and mobile communication were becoming ubiquitous; since then, the amount of time young people spend online has only increased. However – just as was true at the time of the Palmer et al (2013) brief – more recent efforts at data collection have generally continued the pattern of collapsing TNB+ young people and LGBQ young people into a single category, making the specificities of TNB+ Internet use and access more difficult to capture. Only a handful of research teams – for example, McInroy and colleagues (2018) – have made an intentional effort to parse these cohorts apart (and for that reason, the data they provide is highly valuable). McInroy and colleagues (2018) find that trans young people remain significantly more likely than other cohorts of LGBQ young people to spend five or more hours per day online, with

56.2% of trans respondents indicating that this figure accurately characterizes their usage. Recent data from the Trevor Project (2021) indicates that while only 33% of trans and non-binary young people claim a safe and gender-affirming environment in the home, 71% report regular access to gender-affirming spaces and relationships online.

That TNB+ young adults are disproportionately active online today should come as little surprise, given the long history of trans organizing in virtual spaces. Gender non-conforming people have leveraged the Internet to explore their identities for as long as the Internet has been publicly accessible (Dame-Griff, forthcoming). Prior to the Internet, access to information about trans identities or medical transition was difficult to come by, and connections to other trans *people* even more so. In this context, forging community required caution, persistence, and creativity. Trans digital historian Avery Dame-Griff recounted one of these innovative strategies in a recent interview (Giardina 2019), evincing just how much the times have changed:

Before the Internet, one way that [trans groups] would make themselves known is that you'd also have card catalog systems at the public library. They had a whole campaign where they would create fake Dewey decimal card systems that members would sneak into the actual catalog. They had all these specific trans and cross-dressing topics, so that when the people got to the catalog, they'd be redirected to their local chapter.

It wasn't until the late 1980s that things started to change for the better, beginning with the digitization of the first major e-newsletter (part of FTM International). The advent of the first digital newsletters and e-mail listservs was in itself transformative for many trans and gender non-conforming people. These technologies offered a means of accessing information and connecting with other trans people *privately*, without having to brave the public library or risk being outed to colleagues and friends. Digital *discussion boards*, including those hosted by Usenet and AOL, were even more popular, enabling a more immediate exchange of ideas between users. Access to

these spaces remained fraught, however, due to both (A) the necessity of home Internet access (far less accessible in the early 1990s), and (B) the constant threat of infiltration or closure. As Avery Dame-Griff and Gwendolyn Smith (founder of the annual Transgender Day of Remembrance observance) reflected together:

Smith: The Gazebo [one AOL forum for trans women] was named in honor of Lauren D. Wilson, a woman who had committed suicide before we started it. She'd said she wished there was a place we could all go just to hang out together, and that's what it became. In the early days of AOL, you couldn't have a public chat using the word 'transsexual' or 'transvestite.' They'd find you and switch the forum to private, and no one would be able to find you. We had to be clever about it. There was a chat called 'Christine Jorgenson' that threw them off the scent for a while, [and] then there was one called 'Virginia Prince.' They would always find us and shut us down, even when we started using terms like MTF and FTM. AOL had these people searching for banned words, and they would eventually find us...we reached out to the GLCF [Gay and Lesbian Community Forums] to create a permanent transgender discussion and resource area on the service. We designed it to be a public area; anyone could find us. We had our own keyword, which is basically the AOL version of having a URL today. People could type it in and go immediately to our area...20,000 individual accounts would be hitting the area in a month, and this is [in] 1996. (Giardina 2019)

Dame-Griff: Bulletin Board Systems [BBS] provided [us with] that kind of immediate access – that's why that system is revolutionary. Before that, you had to get connected to either one of the national LGBT publications – and that was dicey, that could out you – or connect to a small, regional group. Those groups maintained libraries of information; they had books and photos you could have access to, [or] they did video nights, where you'd get a VHS and watch it in someone's basement. So the Internet really allowed people to get the information they needed without exposing or outing themselves. (Giardina 2019)

Transition into the "Web 2.0" era brought more change, introducing new capacities for multimedia integration. The rise of the first social media and social blogging platforms (including LiveJournal and MySpace) brought a new level of interconnectivity to the online community experience, while the integration of audio-visual materials like photographs and video clips introduced a new sense of co-presence. These platforms afforded not only the formation of

communicative ties between trans users, but also an opportunity to explore new forms of *embodiment* and self-presentation: resources that many users in these spaces found invaluable. Dame-Griff summarized this transition by saying, “a lot of people don’t think about the development of the home page as being important, but I’d argue that we don’t get the modern trans Internet without the home page changing and allowing trans folks to think about how they could present themselves digitally” (Giardina 2019). Amos Mac, founder of *Original Plumbing* – a popular ‘90s zine geared towards transgender men – has explained how this shift was influential not only in terms of helping trans people to envision their own *online* body projects, but also in providing readers with the information and tools needed to transform their bodies *off-line*:

I would lurk on LiveJournal and not post. I found links to people’s personal websites. I found a lot of trans guys [that way]. They would document their transition – like, literally every hair that grew on their face. Receipts for every syringe ever purchased, every surgery, everything. They wanted to give a full sense of how much money all of it cost. At the time, I didn’t have a community, really...there was [one] guy [online] who had a very active presence, and was in a relationship with a much older guy. It was one of the first times I saw a trans guy living a happy life and being in a good relationship...[but] the majority of people I grew up following online, who were documenting their transition, are really hard to find now, because a lot of them are stealth...they had a very A-to-Z transition in mind, and once they ‘completed’ their transition and put it all up online to share with other people, they would just go dark.

Today’s cultural landscape, of course, is different still, affording users suites of tools and opportunities for connection that would have been impossible to envision, even as little as 20 years ago. Today’s trans and non-binary Internet users regulate the accessibility of their content on a post-by-post basis, tailoring privacy settings to meet their individual needs. They explore new forms of embodiment, aided by digital tools (like Snapchat filters) that can transform their appearance and supported by a community of like-minded others that can give them real-time feedback on their presentation. They comb through archives of information on TNB+ identities

that span across decades – a process made much simpler by improvements in search engine technology and by the advent of user-generated hashtags. They forge friendships with other TNB+ people that transcend the digital/analog divide, and communicate with these people in an ever-expanding variety of modalities (synchronously and asynchronously; publicly and privately; using video, voice, images, and text, sometimes simultaneously). The contemporary social media landscape has enabled TNB+ young people to engage with the content of their identities and to connect with other trans people on a previously unprecedented scale.

Can I “Afford” to be TNB+? Understanding Sociotechnical Affordances

Of course, not all virtual communities are created equal. Social benefits accrue to LGBTQ+ users *not* simply as an effect of the online context itself, but also as an effect of the *affordances* that each platform offers to its users. *Affordances* are the possibilities for action that platform users perceive, based on the available features and their interpretation of their possible uses (Norman 1988). By offering users different constellations of features and tools, each online community *affords* a different collection of possibilities, both for connecting with other users and for representing the self.

One affordance that many social media platforms offer to users is *anonymity* — the ability to conceal (or to control the accessibility of information about) one’s “true” identity. Online, LGBTQ+ young people can choose — at least to a point — their desired level of engagement: they can elect to “lurk,” observing the interactions of others without speaking, or choose to consume information without contributing their own (Fox & Ralston 2016). In spaces that afford *asynchronous* communication, like Tumblr and Facebook, users are also better equipped to control the *pacing* of their interactions with others (Cavalcante 2019): they can mull through the decision,

for instance, of whether or not to disclose their identity in response to another user's prompting, without fear of being caught "off-guard" or worrying that their physical reaction to the question will betray their feelings. The relative anonymity of the Internet can make interpersonal exploration feel safer and more accessible to some respondents, allowing them to explore and "try on" new presentations of self without fear of social reprisal (and, just as importantly, allowing them to *discard* these adaptations if they're found to be ill-fitting).

Another important affordance is the Internet's capacity to draw users together across massive physical distances — a capacity that makes the Internet a fabulously useful tool for uniting and mobilizing communities that are small in number, or geographically dispersed. For members of marginalized communities, this interconnectivity can be a literal lifeline. In addition, many online spaces afford the *persistence* of such resources: links and other posted content can be circulated to unanticipated audiences, and remain accessible to others for long periods of time (in many cases, persisting via recirculation even after the original content has been removed).

While anonymity and the possibility of connecting across large distances are affordances attractive to users positioned all across the LGBTQ+ spectrum, there are also affordances that may hold a *particular* value to those that are TNB+. Perhaps the most compelling of these opportunities is the Internet's capacity to obscure information about the corporeal "reality" of the body (Brophy 2010). Those whose presentations would tend to "out" them in offline spaces have more control over how (and whether) online audiences perceive their bodies. In addition, the online context may help to offer users an opportunity to deconstruct or subvert labels that have served to marginalize them in offline interactions (Cover 2012; Brophy 2010). For instance, Darwin's (2017) analysis of genderqueer Reddit users demonstrates how users strategically showcase and re-frame images of themselves to trouble or to problematize binary gender distinctions, arguing that the online context

enables users to “do” non-binary gender in culturally resonant ways (without fear of others eliding them back into the gender binary, as is so common in offline contexts — see Garrison 2018). In a similar analysis, Oakley (2016) describes how trans users leverage Tumblr’s affordances to complicate cissexism and heteronormativity, constructing and enacting nuanced identity performances that disrupt the existing frames deployed to make sense of trans lives.

In addition, many TNB+ young people use the Internet to access vital information about social and medical transition — information that can be used to literally *reshape* their corporeal reality. For example, Daniels (2009) demonstrates that many trans individuals leverage the Internet to manage, transform, and control their physical bodies, bringing the body “online” (through the integration of digital media, such as photographs and video clips) and taking the digital “offline” (by collecting information and resources online that will ultimately enable them to transform their embodied selves). Even in cases where users opt *not* to pursue physical transition, this iterative process allows TNB+ youth to experiment with self-presentation online, while still affording them the ability to convey information about their bodies to others on their own terms.

A final affordance to consider is the Internet’s utility as an *archiving* tool: that it offers users the ability to create a personal repository of shared content, memorializing major life milestones and helping to chronicle users’ growth over time. Features like Facebook’s “Memories” and the integration of third-party applications like “Timehop” now prompt users to “look back” at (and, in some cases, to re-share) posts from weeks, months, or years ago. Users also have the option on most platforms to review a stream of their previously-posted content, dating all the way back to their account’s inception: users can *see* at a glance how they’ve grown, and how their identities and attitudes have evolved over time. While this persistence may constitute a *liability* rather than a benefit for some groups of trans users, many others find this kind of personal

archiving desirable and rewarding. Many TNB+ young people leverage social media to chronicle their social and physical transitions, creating a living history of their own transition process — and, at the same time, capturing that process to serve as a resource for other users, who might in turn use it to visualize their own coming out and transition trajectories (Haimson et al 2021).

Given the tremendous appeal of these various affordances, it makes sense that TNB+ young people would describe their online interactions as rewarding, and their time spent in online communities as pleasurable. However, the *reality* of life in these spaces is often more complex. For one thing, as my interviewees roundly attested, harassment is a pervasive and ongoing threat for LGBTQ+ people online (Palmer et al 2013; Compton 2019; GLAAD 2021). Just this year, GLAAD released a formal statement designating all five of the world’s most popular social media platforms -- Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube -- as “effectively unsafe for [all] LGBTQ users,” based upon the “prevalence and intensity of hate speech and harassment” and the “problem of anti-LGBTQ misinformation” within these networks (GLAAD 2021). (In an interview regarding the statement, GLAAD President Sarah Kate Ellis reportedly confessed that analysts had originally intended to *grade* each platform based on its safety for LGBTQ users, but were forced to change direction when they realized that none of the platforms would earn a passing score (Silva 2021)). Openly labeling oneself as trans or non-binary and joining a trans-focused online community -- particularly a publicly-accessible one -- generally means coping with abuse, stemming both from people with trans-antagonistic views (like TERFs and social conservatives) *and* from other trans and gender non-conforming people. This ongoing threat of violence can dampen some users’ enthusiasm for participating in trans spaces.

There is also evidence to suggest that social media may be partially responsible for the rising prevalence of anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions (including eating

disorders) among teens and young adults, both cis and trans. Studies of cisgender teens have suggested that heavy social media use may contribute to lower self-esteem (Steinsbekk et al 2021; Scott & Woods 2018), poorer body image (Boursier et al 2020; Hawes et al 2020; Rodgers et al 2020), increased feelings of loneliness (Berryman et al 2018) and “FOMO” (the “fear of missing out” -- see Scott & Woods 2018), higher levels of anxiety and depression (Bettmann et al 2021; Shensa et al 2017; Vannucci et al 2017), and even increased substance abuse (Daniels et al 2021; Brunborg et al 2017). Transgender and non-binary people -- and TNB+ *young* people in particular -- are a population disproportionately vulnerable to psychological distress, given both the depression and anxiety associated with the experience of gender dysphoria itself and the high rates of discrimination, violence, and transphobia (including *internalized* transphobia) that TNB+ people face (Valentine & Shpherd 2019; Trevor Project 2019). Intensive use of social media has the potential to exacerbate these concerns, increasing TNB+ young people’s exposure to harassment and bullying and increasing feelings of anxiety and depression. The limited research available on the emotional sequelae of social media use *for trans users specifically* paints a complex picture of these issues, suggesting that the *benefits* of heavy social media use for TNB+ young people -- including increased access to social support (Selkie et al 2020), increased affirmation of their gender identity (Craig et al 2021), and improved body image (Allen et al 2021) -- may outweigh the risks of such usage. However, the same body of literature confirming these positive impacts also suggests that TNB+ youth remain just as susceptible to the feelings of loneliness, self-consciousness, and “FOMO” that problematic social media use triggers in their cisgender peers (Allen et al 2021). How can we contend with the reality that the same spaces that trans and non-binary young people find most attractive and empowering – indeed, in some cases, the spaces that have made their lives *possible* – may also be culpable for this harm?

Dissertation Overview

Drawing from a total of 67 in-depth interviews collected longitudinally from a cohort of 49 trans, non-binary, and otherwise gender-expansive young people (and coupled with textual analysis of their social media profiles), my dissertation examines the strategies and tools that TNB+ young people leverage to construct, present, and account for their gender identities using social media. Remaining “accountable” to gender online necessitates no small amount of creativity and adaptability on the part of social media users -- particularly those who disrupt gender norms. As users and their online audiences strive to negotiate the terms of what “authentic” gender identity narratives look like, open questions about which identity claims should be considered reliable incentivize intra-community factionalization and boundary policing. The very same features that many trans users find most compelling — anonymity, personal archiving, the potential to create trans-exclusive “safe spaces,” and decentralization of the body — *also* serve to drive user paranoia, to precipitate intra-community factionalization and boundary-policing, and to amplify the risk of being targeted or harassed by other users. Social pressures to produce the “right” kind of gendered account online can inhibit users from sharing their experience freely, or lead them to “standardize” their accounts in accordance with others (to maximize the likelihood that they’ll be taken as credible). The anonymity or pseudonymity offered across many platforms can foster a sense of collective apprehension about whether others ‘really are’ who they present themselves to be, raising both the likelihood and the stakes of identity policing. Established group members become anxious about monitoring community boundaries, trying to ensure that intimate group spaces aren’t compromised, which in turn means that users are more likely to challenge one another; when users *do* challenge each other, they’re often able to do more damaging in their attempts, because they’re readily able to “keep receipts” on each other (taking screenshots, etc. to document prior

representations of self, or representations culled from other online spaces), *and* because evidence of users' transgressions persists online (potentially indefinitely). In addition to complicating the potential for political mobilization, the climate of surveillance precipitated by this policing — and, moreover, the looming threat of being targeted by other users as a “fake” or an outsider — often serves to jeopardize users' self-esteem, whether their identity claims are ultimately questioned by other users or not. My research examines how TNB+ young people balance these tensions, weighing the benefits of their social media participation against the corresponding risks; it details some of the *strategies* they employ to protect themselves in online spaces, and elaborates some of the *consequences* of this calculus, both for trans and non-binary young people *individually* and for the broader social and political mobilization of online TNB+ communities.

In chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation, I explain *how* I've worked to answer these questions. Chapter 2 details my research methodology, providing a comprehensive overview of my recruitment process, the types of data collected, and how the research process was organized. In turn, Chapter 3 describes the contours of my research *sample*, detailing the social demographics of the 49 project participants, and provides an overview of how participants in this sample described their gender and sexual identities. This chapter also provides insight and context into some of the intra-community *tensions* that prevail in TNB+ spaces -- for example, the ongoing and pervasive conflict between “transmedicalists” (those who believe gender dysphoria to be a necessary and integral component of trans experience) and trans or non-binary people that don't experience gender dysphoria, or conflict surrounding whether non-binary users are “allowed” to describe themselves as lesbian or Sapphic -- and highlights the historical underpinnings of these tensions, elaborating the roots of these conflicts (and showing how they continue to influence interactions within trans spaces today).

The conflicts described above might best be characterized as gender *accountability* challenges (West & Zimmerman 1987). As Chapter 4 describes, all of us -- trans and cis alike -- are called upon to demonstrate our accountability to gender on a regular basis, articulating (and defending) our gender experience to others by producing different kinds of gendered accounts. In Chapter 4, I take a closer look at what it means to demonstrate accountability to gender as a trans or non-binary person. Participants in my sample complicate existing theory and research on gender accountability -- and not just by challenging the gender binary. While binary-aligned trans participants might still be tasked with demonstrating their accountability to masculinity or to femininity (just as cis men and women are), those who seek to claim a trans identity label must also demonstrate their accountability to *transness*. In Chapter 4 -- a “pilot” study for the work undertaken in the rest of the dissertation -- I explore what it *means* to demonstrate accountability to transness, elaborating participants’ descriptions of the “dominant narrative” of trans experience. Participants described this narrative as emphasizing (A) persistent and all-consuming gender dysphoria, (B) a life-long awareness of that dysphoria, (C) life-long interest in styles and pursuits associated with the “opposite sex,” and (D) desire to transition. Since existing (binary) understandings of gender have affirmed only some types of gendered accounts as “authentic” (while others are discredited or obscured), many TNB+ people express anxiety about whether their experience of gender can be distilled into a narrative that is intelligible to others and appears consistent over time. For binary-aligned and non-binary participants alike, findings from this chapter suggest that anxiety about demonstrating that one is “trans enough” can feel intense and all consuming, with virtually all participants expressing apprehension about whether their histories would pass evaluation. However, while binary-aligned participants -- and, in particular, those that sought medical transition -- often found that affirming their dysphoria and demonstrating their

“commitment” to trans identity bought them some additional flexibility in terms of presentation, non-binary participants reported that they felt pressure to “binarize” their presentation (e.g., making an effort to present in a masculine manner as an AFAB person, or in a feminine manner as an AMAB person) and pressure to standardize their accounts of their experience in order to be taken seriously as trans. For non-binary participants, the project of “proving” one’s transness often hinged on producing accounts that *affirmed* the gender binary, rather than challenging or undermining it.

While Chapter 4 builds on our understanding of what it means to demonstrate accountability to gender as a trans or non-binary person, Chapter 5 builds upon our understanding of what it means to demonstrate accountability to gender in the (relative) absence of the body. As West and Zimmerman (1987) emphasize in their seminal treatise on “doing gender,” gender attribution in corporeal spaces is a process of *sensory perception* (Friedman 2014), anchored by sets of embodied signifiers (style of dress, secondary sex characteristics, height and build, and so on) that can be visibly or audibly perceived. Online -- while this kind of visual information isn’t often wholly *inaccessible*, particularly now, in the Web 2.0 era -- these kinds of signifiers are somewhat *less* salient: Internet users have more control over the ways in which their bodies are represented, and the ways in which others access information about their bodies. This relative decentralization of the body has been taken as a source of potential and promise for TNB+ youth, whose bodies might serve to out or stigmatize them in many off-line contexts. However, as I argue, shifting focus away from the body doesn’t free users from the imperative to account for their gender experience. Instead, when the body is decentralized, *label-based* identity claims come to take center stage -- claims that require different types of labor to support. I elaborate a series of risks that these new standards for ‘proving’ one’s authenticity as TNB+ may present for users, and

elaborate the broader significance of these changes, both for the sociological understanding of gender accountability and for the life outcomes of users themselves.

Since label-based identity claims are so prevalent and visible online, some have argued that social media has spurred an “unnecessary” proliferation of gender identity descriptors. (Indeed, this alleged proliferation of new identity labels is one of the factors that Abigail Shrier (2020) underscores as evidence of adolescent attention-seeking, or evidence that new gender and sexual identity labels are “spreading” among teens due to “social contagion”). In Chapter 6, I turn my attention to Tumblr -- a platform my participants repeatedly cited as an “incubator” for new identity labels -- to examine this proliferation in more detail. I argue that the platform architecture of Tumblr itself -- in particular, its content infrastructure (including the features available for posting content, tagging content, and reblogging/sharing content), its separation from existing SMS (like Facebook), its identity-focused networking, and its decentralization of the body -- makes it highly conducive to this kind of identity exploration (and to the coinage of new identity terms). While these features hold great potential and promise for TNB+ young people, enabling them to identify themselves to the public in ways that might go unrecognized in analog contexts, my findings suggest that these *same features* may also serve to create conditions on Tumblr which are hostile to TNB+ youth, or which can dissuade them from full participation.

In Chapter 7, I extend my arguments on platform design to examine an outgrowth of these identity challenges: the proliferation of intra-community “callouts” and “cancellations” online. Participants in this sample described the threat of being “called out” by other TNB+ people (whether for their questionable identity claims, their bad opinions, their general ignorance, or all of the above) as a source of omnipresent anxiety as they navigated TNB+ spaces online. While these spaces are often billed as inclusive, participants -- particularly *new* participants, or those that

are just beginning to explore their identities -- don't always experience them as such. While "callouts" and group excommunications have been recognized as common features of identity movements (and have been since well before the Internet -- see Clark 2020, Ross 2019), I argue that the affordances of the digital environment have *amplified* these events (both in terms of their frequency/visibility, and in terms of their long-term impacts). Even more insidiously -- and just as in Chapter 6 -- I find that the features and affordances responsible for this amplification are often the self-same features that serve to attract TNB+ people into these communities to begin with. The atmosphere of antagonism and paranoia precipitated by repeated callout and cancellation events can have negative consequences for TNB+ young people, who generally enter into TNB+ online communities seeking information and support. In addition, while online communities have been touted in the sociological literature as hubs of modern-day coalition-building and social movement activity (e.g. Tufekci 2017; Castells 2012; Brown et al 2012), I argue that many of the strategies users deploy to *circumvent* the threat of call-outs -- for example, disengaging from participation altogether (and thus foreclosing one's access to vital group resources), or forming smaller "spin-off" communities with even more membership restrictions (thus reducing the potential for coalition-building with other cohorts of TNB+ people) -- can ultimately serve to *undermine* the possibility of collective mobilization for TNB+ youth, rather than reinforcing it.

A final chapter then turns the lens onto *myself* as ethnographer, explaining how the intra-community dynamics precipitated by these affordances stand to impact the research process itself (particularly for data collectors that are themselves TNB+). To successfully conduct qualitative research -- and, in particular, to do so as an "insider," or as a member of the community under study -- it is first beneficial to cultivate *trust*. The cultivation of trust typically involves transparency and reciprocity of self-disclosure on the part of the researcher. However, self-

disclosures issued within the context of online research often operate differently than disclosures made within the context of a traditional interview or call for recruitment. In the era of social media, participants have greater access to information about our identities -- regardless of whether or not we *actually* disclose those identities publicly online -- and can infer from the information presented (or obscured) whether or not they wish to participate. Being vulnerable and “authentic” as a researcher can lead to more effective recruitment and richer data collection, but may also require us to make sacrifices that shape the trajectory of our careers and scholarship in unpredictable ways.

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA ANALYSIS

As established in the introductory chapter, online communities make fruitful terrain for the study of stigmatized populations -- and for the study of TNB+ young people in particular. The Internet presents TNB+ young people with a broad spectrum of resources, including opportunities to access unbiased information about sexual and gender identities (Schudson & Van Anders 2019; Palmer et al 2013; McDermott and Roen 2012), to read about others' experiences (Wargo 2017; Cavalcante 2019), and to connect and forge friendships with other TNB+ people (Selkie et al 2020; Allen et al 2020). Online communities can also offer coping tools that aid young people struggling with self-confidence, depression, or anxiety -- all common issues among LGBTQ teens and young adults. For instance, Fox and Ralston (2016) have found that virtual communities offer young trans and non-binary people opportunities to access accurate (and affirming) information about gender -- opportunities that their sample described as important in coping with the depression and anxiety that often accompany keeping TNB+ identities concealed from others.

Online recruitment and data collection can also help to circumvent some of the long-standing issues surrounding in-person sampling of LGBTQ young people. As Savin-Williams (2001) notes, the fact that many LGBTQ youth are not out to others (or take measures to conceal their identities and relationships from the general public) has long been a recruitment challenge for researchers interested in gender and sexuality -- one that has contributed to an over-reliance upon white, educated, urban samples of young people who are already connected to off-line LGBTQ spaces and support networks (see also McDermott and Roen 2012). The anonymity (or

pseudonymity) offered by the Internet can present young people with a comparatively safe space to practice disclosing their identities to others and to explore presentation of self. As a consequence, many young people that aren't out to others in "meatspace" *are* out to others -- either known, or unknown -- online (Palmer et al 2013). Young people often describe the online support communities they inhabit -- particularly identity-based communities (Wagaman et al 2020) -- as "sources of empathy and understanding, and as [spaces that offer] a way of coping with social and psychological distress (McDermott and Roen 2012, p. 562).

Some have argued that research participants may also be more inclined to disclose stigmatized identities or to speak openly with researchers when the research encounter itself is digitally mediated. For example, McDermott and Roen (2012) have suggested that the absence of the body from the online research encounter (as well as the physical distance between participant and interviewer) can encourage more "honest" discussion about gender and sexuality (p. 562). In addition, the increasing integration of online technologies (including video-conferencing) into everyday life lends a sense of "ordinariness" to online communication with strangers -- particularly among young people -- that can aid in disclosure and rapport building (Weller 2017; p. 623).

However, while sociologists have generally treated the turn toward "online qualitative research" (Bouchard 2016) as favorable, there is no monolithic "online methodology": here, as anywhere, the "ideal" choice of method depends on the question of interest. Interview-based methods, for example, are often treated as the "gold standard" (Weller 2017, p. 613) for researching meaning-making, interpretation, and identity. These methods yield "thicker information and body talk" (Rettie 2009, p. 422) than do the quantitative analyses of online content privileged by champions of "Big Data" (Hughes et al 2020). Where survey-based methods can capture only a momentary snapshot of participants' experiences, qualitative interviews afford

opportunities to construct a *reciprocal dialogue* with participants, making it possible to explore the *evolution* of participants' feelings and beliefs. Interviews are an *active*, processual form of data collection -- they are the product of *joint* "performative, narrative, and biographical *work*" (Hughes et al 2020, p. 542; emphasis in original), wherein researchers and participants act in *concert* to construct experiential accounts. Interview-based methods yield a number of advantages, including the ability to cross-check for (and address) contradiction or inconsistency in participants' responses (particularly when interviews are conducted longitudinally) and the ability to center *participants'* language, identities, and perceptions of events (instead of attempting to impose a particular academic framework or set of terms on these experiences, as might be done in a survey). Interview-based methods can also help to increase the rapport between participants and researchers, increasing participants' investment in the research process and heightening their willingness to disclose (Miller 2017).

However, as extant research has contended, interviewing participants about their social media use is fraught with methodological challenges. It can be difficult to interview people effectively about events that happened in the past -- even the relatively recent past -- as participants' recall tends to worsen with time and recall of routine events (like making an unremarkable social media post) is notoriously poor (Griffioen et al 2020; Ellis et al 2019; Boase & Ling 2013). As interacting on social media has become an increasingly ubiquitous and "ordinary" (Weller 2017, p. 623) part of young people's daily experience, individual encounters on social media have also become increasingly likely to fade into the "background" of day-to-day life, further decreasing the likelihood of effective recall.

One potential anecdote to this issue is to rely on *observations* of participant behavior, rather than participants' *accounts* of their behavior. Social media makes observing participants' online

behavior comparatively easy -- certainly easier, in some ways, than it would be in a conventional ethnographic context. Changes to participants' profiles and interactions with other users can be monitored and logged in real time. There's been a ton of sociological interest in these tools, because they can compile so much data at once, and with relatively little expense or labor involved. This is why much of the work on Web-based identity construction to date has utilized content analysis -- the collection and systematic coding of blog posts, profile images, and other online content to determine salient patterns and themes. While this methodology has enabled researchers to identify a series of general principles and hypotheses about how identity construction (and reconstruction) operates online, it too suffers from a significant shortcoming. Content analysis can tell us a great deal about *what* types of content people are posting to the Internet (and about what patterns exist), but it can tell us little about *why* respondents post certain types of content, or *how* respondents arrive at the decision to post (or remove) particular artifacts. Nor can content analysis help us to understand how respondents *make sense* of their content -- how they interpret the artifacts they choose to share, and how they come to understand them as consistent (or inconsistent) with their sense of self, either expressed or perceived. Thus, these data suffer from the opposite problem to that outlined above; while they can tell us a great deal about *what* users have done (and with a high degree of precision/reliability), they tell us little about *why* users have done it.

In this research, I have been interested in exploring how my participants *make meaning* of their social media use: how they *interpret* and *understand* their experiences on social media, and how they leverage those interpretations to make decisions about future engagement online. To address these questions, I've needed the "best of both worlds" -- the concrete record of participants' online behavior afforded by content analysis, and the opportunity to build a detailed dialogue about those experiences afforded by face-to-face, synchronous contact. Accordingly, in

this dissertation, I have deployed a two-phase, longitudinal data collection process that couples the systematic content analysis of participants' social media profiles with in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This approach has enabled me both to “fact check” participants' recollections of their online experiences (by returning to the record provided by social media), and to refresh participants' memories of particular encounters (or pieces of content), thus priming them to explore them with me within the interview setting (mirroring the application of “vignettes” in the interview setting championed by Sampson and Johannessen (2019), or the “stimulated recall method” advocated in Griffioen et al 2020).

Age of Participants

All participants recruited for this project were between the ages of 18 and 25 at the time of their first interview. Research suggests that questions related to identity development and self-definition take on a special urgency for those navigating young adulthood (Doster 2013; Manago et al 2014; Valkenburg et al 2005), and as a consequence, young adults may be more likely to question their identities or to “experiment” with new forms of identity and presentation than older adults (Manago et al 2014). As such, teens and young adults are also more likely than others to seek repeated *feedback* on their identity performances – perhaps all the more so within online communities, where such feedback can be accessed on demand and from multiple sources (Doster 2013). These factors -- coupled with the fact that young people are significantly more active on social media (Auxier and Anderson 2021) than are older adults, and that young people are more likely than members of older generations to describe themselves both as LGBTQ (Jones 2021; GLAAD 2017) and as TNB+ in particular (GLAAD 2017) -- made organizing my research around young adults seem like a natural choice.

Site Selection

A majority of the extant research on identity formation within digital environments has targeted individual *spaces*, examining the users of only one focal website or social network at a time (Griffioen et al 2020). Context matters, and each online environment is unique, making it difficult or impossible to generalize across cases collected in different environments. As a result, researchers have tended to bound their analysis by focusing on the characteristics and experiences of particular cohorts of users: for example, Facebook users (Ellison et al 2006; 2007) or Match.com daters (Walker & Eller 2016; Arvidsson 2006; McGrath et al 2016). However, this focus on individual platforms has made it challenging to elaborate the differences that may emerge as respondents move *within* and *between* different online spaces. My work helps to address this gap in the literature by recruiting participants *cross-contextually*, building the reality that today's young people manage interactions across multiple platforms simultaneously directly into the research design.

Participants were recruited through four prominent social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and Tumblr. I have also recruited users via two large community-specific online message boards: "Rachel's House" (a community forum for transgender and gender-variant individuals) and "Outside the Box" (a message board geared toward those who are exploring or questioning their gender identity). A description of each field site (and an explanation for each site's selection) is provided below.

Facebook: Facebook is one of the most prominent and highly utilized social networking sites in the world, boasting over 1.7 billion users (some 1.1 billion of whom update their accounts

at least once per day)¹¹. 70% of all American adults ages 18-29 claim at least one active Facebook profile (Auxier and Anderson 2021), suggesting that Facebook use remains ubiquitous among users in this age group. Facebook is also unique relative to the other two sites selected, in that a majority of Facebook users utilize Facebook to connect and share with people that they already know off-line (Lampe et al 2006). This means that the constraints on presentation are different: what folks present on Facebook has to reflect what others already know of them in the off-line world. This suggests that the content participants share on Facebook may provide a useful counterpoint to the content they generate and share on Instagram and Tumblr, which is generally directed towards audiences that users may not know personally (or be able to predict).

Instagram: Instagram is a popular photo-sharing application, available for a variety of platforms (both mobile and browser-based). There are an estimated 400 million Instagram users¹²; roughly 28% of all adults with Internet access are active on Instagram, as are 55% of all Internet users ages 18 to 29. Instagram affords users the ability to share photos (as well as video clips of 15 seconds or less) and to add text captions to the images they share, but does not allow longer-form blog posts or status updates.

I believed that using Instagram to recruit respondents would help to maximize the number of *images of participants* available for me to code and review. In addition, unlike the other two sites under study, Instagram allows users to protect their entire feed of images, but doesn't allow users to change the privacy settings for individual images, meaning that every image posted is accessible to the user's full retinue of "followers." This suggests that Instagram users may utilize different strategies to manage their presentation on Instagram than they leverage on other social networking sites. In addition, some research has contended that young adults who spend significant amounts of time seeking feedback from others on Instagram may be disproportionately vulnerable

to self-esteem concerns and body image disturbances (Kim 2021; Chatzopoulou et al 2020; Butkowski et al 2019; Fardouly et al 2018; Cohen et al 2017). As these kinds of concerns remain endemic among TNB+ teens and young adults, I believe it is important to examine how TNB+ young people utilize Instagram, particularly with respect to the process of seeking feedback on gender performance.

Tumblr: Tumblr is a multimedia micro-blogging platform that enables users to compose profiles of themselves and their interests by means of bricolage, re-blogging materials discovered elsewhere online (and, occasionally, contributing content of their own) in a collage of “found objects” that reflect their particular visions, identities, or tastes (Rheingold 2012). As Fink and Miller describe, “Even more so than platforms like WordPress or Blogger, Tumblr allows users to cultivate a personal style at the level of design, which many users orient toward an aesthetic of formal experimentation” (Fink & Miller 2014). Tumblr’s flexible interface and dynamic integration of multiple media types (including images, video, and audio clips) have made it massively popular among teens and young adults, some 20% of whom were estimated to maintain an active account at the time of my recruitment (Pew 2015). By recruiting respondents on Tumblr, I hoped to gain a clearer perspective on how young people are using mixed-media and multi-media tools to represent their bodies online.

Perhaps even more compelling than Tumblr’s accommodation of multiple media types, however, is Tumblr’s established capacity to facilitate counterpublic communication (Fink & Miller 2014; Renninger 2015). “Counterpublics” are subaltern or niche social spheres, characterized by their resistance to predominating cultural value systems (Warner 2002). While counterpublic communication has the potential to serve as both a powerful and legitimating instrument of social change, communication between the members of counterpublics is fragile,

difficult to organize and maintain (Renninger 2015). However, by making commentary on Tumblr posts trackable, de-incentivizing “trolling” or incendiary comments using structural tools, making it easy to identify the original source of a “re-blogged” item, and consolidating thematic discussions around publicly-recognizable “hashtags,” some have argued that Tumblr has established itself as a protected venue for communication between the members of marginalized communities. Indeed, some have gone so far as to label Tumblr a quintessentially “trans technology” (Haimson et al 2021) -- a space that “enable[s] non-normative, fluid, non-linear, and multiple identity presentations, making it queer both in theory and in use by LGBTQ people” (Haimson et al 2021, p. 346; see also Cavalcante 2019, Cho 2018, Fink & Miller 2014). As queer and trans-identified young people continue to be subject to public stigmatization, it was my hope that recruiting on Tumblr would enable me to access these respondents in greater numbers than might be possible on Facebook or Instagram.

“Rachel’s House” and “Outside the Box”: These “classic,” text-based online message boards sites are quite different from the social networking sites described above, both in terms of their user populations and in terms of the affordances they provide. These message boards are largely disconnected from most networked social media, offering users pseudonymous engagement that isn’t tethered to any service requiring authentication. In addition, these sites are among the first community-based informational resources that respondents are likely to encounter when searching for information about their identities via search engine (for example, if a user Googles “questioning gender”). I hypothesized that respondents may use these smaller, less public communities as points of entry into exploring their self-concept and experimenting with self-presentation, refining their sense of the “possible selves” available to them. These explorations can then be carried forward into additional (more public) contexts, including one’s more “mainstream”

social media profiles, as respondents shift from formulating “I” (their individualized conception of self – see Mead 1934) to negotiating “me” (a fully networked and socialized conception of self – the self-in-interaction).

Recruitment and Data Collection

I took a multidimensional approach to the recruitment process, leveraging a combination of strategies that made use of each focal platform’s features. As a first step, I took out a series of sponsored advertisements for the project on Facebook, leveraging Facebook’s unique tools to promote the project *exclusively* to trans and non-binary participants in my target age range. In addition to targeting participants that had explicitly set their gender identities on Facebook to options other than “man” or “woman,” I also targeted ads toward users that had “liked,” clicked other ads mentioning, followed other people that had liked, or run keyword searches for trans and gender-related topics. A full representation of the keywords targeted¹⁴ in my recruitment ads appears in the figure below.

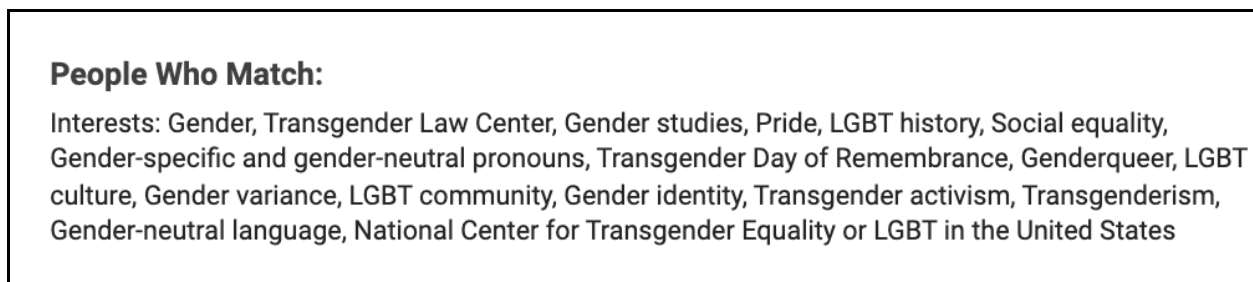


Figure 2.1: This figure displays the keywords used to target my Facebook recruitment advertisement.

I also recruited online by posting calls for recruitment in smaller fora -- for instance, subreddits, Facebook groups, and online message boards. However, these smaller-scale calls for

¹⁴ It should be noted that these target keywords are pre-selected by Facebook (generally, derived from the titles of user “Interest” pages or linked to the pages of national organizations), and cannot be selected or entered by users directly.

recruitment yielded only a fraction of the total non-pilot participants (n=3), with the vast majority of participants (n=29) reporting that they initially discovered the project through a formal Facebook ad. A small proportion of participants (n = 4; about 10%) were “snowball sampled,” referred by other participants on the project.

I also created a Facebook page, a Tumblr profile, and a separate page on my personal website to promote the project, and cross-linked these materials (so that people could link to my website easily from the Facebook page, and vice versa -- promoting transparency). The Facebook page I created for recruitment is a “business” page, separate from my personal Facebook profile, and contains only a detailed description of the project, links to my own social media pages and personal website, and an interface for users to ask questions about the work. I believe that choosing to answer questions about the project publicly on Facebook -- as opposed to answering them via direct message or over e-mail -- further enhanced perceptions of transparency among my participants.

I conducted my primary (non-pilot) recruitment for the project in two “waves” -- one beginning in April of 2018, and the second in February of 2020. Recruitment for the second wave of interviews proceeded more rapidly, although I changed little about my recruitment strategy between the two waves. I kept the images used to promote the ad (representations of the trans pride flag) and the keywords used to target it intact, but I changed the text of the ad itself -- in particular, adding a statement that proactively “outed” myself to participants. The two recruitment ads are shown side-by-side in the figure below.

Ad #1: April 20th-May 4th, 2018



Ad #2: February 15th-February 20th, 2020

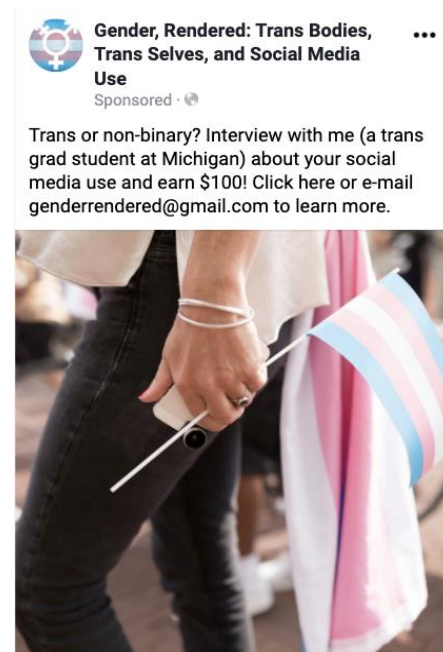


Figure 2.2: This figure displays the two recruitment advertisements used to promote the project on Facebook.

The ad that DID NOT disclose my status (Ad #1; left) ran for 14 days, and it reached 4,175 people in total; it yielded the project Facebook page 314 “likes,” netted 85 other reactions (including a mix of “like,” “love,” “care,” and “haha” reacts) on the advertisement itself, 12 people shared it, and 5 people left comments on the ad. The ad that *did* disclose my status (Ad #2; right) ran for only five days, but it reached an even larger target audience (viewed by 4,277 people in total); it yielded 160 page “likes,” 83 on-ad reactions, 19 shares, and 8 comments. In addition, 21 people “saved” impressions of the latter ad for future review -- something that *none* of the viewers of the original ad elected to do. While there are a variety of factors that may have contributed to the more rapid distribution (and more enthusiastic embrace) of this second advertisement, it is possible that participants’ desire to contribute to trans-led scholarship (and/or their perceived

degree of comfort with an openly trans interviewer, relative to a cis one) have also contributed. Implications of this finding are further explored in Chapter 8.

Demographic Survey

Each respondent was asked to fill out a demographic survey at the time of enrollment. This instrument enabled me to collect information about my respondents' demographic characteristics, social identities, and offline social networks. It has also served as a screening instrument, helping me to verify that respondents met the recruitment qualifications (e.g., age) and that they were currently operating active accounts on at least two of the focal platforms for the project (e.g., Facebook and Instagram). A sample demographic questionnaire has been attached below as **Appendix A**.

Participants were consented for the project through Qualtrics, where they were asked to complete an electronic consent form prior to filling out the demographic questionnaire. The questionnaire itself included open-ended blanks for participants to describe their sexual identities, gender identity, racial or ethnic identities, and religious or spiritual beliefs. Following from Diamond's (2008) decomposition of 'sexual orientation,' sexual identity, attraction, and behavior were addressed separately in the questionnaire. Participants were also asked to indicate their educational attainment, their employment status, and their current place of residence. The questionnaire asked a variety of questions related to participants' social media use, including the platforms on which they were currently active, how frequently they posted or shared content on their favored platforms, and how often they interacted with other users on these sites. Participants were also asked to complete a short network questionnaire, meant to provide a top-down overview of their social support networks (both online and off). They also completed an assortment of questions drawn from a social-psychological instrument called the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison

Orientation Measure (INCOM), a scale intended to measure participants' tendency to make social comparisons or to evaluate their performance against peers (Gibbons & Buunk 1999). Finally, participants answered a series of questions meant to assess their feelings about their status as trans or gender non-conforming, indicating on a series of sliding scales their agreement (or disagreement) with statements like "I feel proud to be trans or gender non-conforming" or "I often feel that my identity as a trans or gender non-conforming person is not legitimate or 'real.'" These statements were meant to provide me with a sense of participants' confidence in their identities, and their attunement to the threat of possible identity challenge or stigmatization by others (either in their offline peer groups, or on social media).

First-Wave Interviews

Initial interviews lasted approximately 2 hours, broken into four sections of 30 minutes each: (1) a section reviewing the respondent's social identities and coming-out process; (2) a section on embodiment, body image, and self-concept; (3) a section on the respondent's social support networks, both online and off; and (4) a section on the respondent's Internet and social media use. This first interview was meant to help me establish a sense of each participant's gender and sexual identities, to give me an overview of the participant's coming-out and transition processes (if any), and to help me make sense of the ways in which each participant conceptualized gender and gender expression more generally. I used these initial interviews to build rapport with participants, and to develop a nuanced understanding of how each respondent perceived themselves. An interview guide for the first wave of interviews has been attached as **Appendix B**.

Social Media “Linking” and Content Analysis

I followed my participants on social media, and also asked them to follow me back. Following participants’ social media content proved to be a methodological challenge, particularly on Facebook -- I didn’t want participants to be able to look at my Friends list and infer (e.g., from those that had been recently “added”) the names and identities of others that might be associated with the project. My solution to this dilemma was to recruit participants via my own primary (personal) Facebook and Instagram profiles, rather than creating a free-standing Facebook profile specific to the project (as I did on Tumblr and Reddit). Adding research participants to my regular (and established) Friends list enabled participants to “blend in” with my existing networks. (Interestingly, even in cases where participants were open about their trans identities on their profiles -- for example, by using trans-themed profile frames, or using images from Pride events as profile pictures -- the fact that my own networks are so richly queer meant that even presenting openly as a trans or gender non-conforming person didn’t necessarily suggest an affiliation with the project.) In addition, I was careful to regularly add other Facebook friends that were *not* affiliated with the project to my profile, to further reduce the risk of identification (e.g., by viewing recent “add” activity) and to protect participants’ privacy.

This six month-interval served as an opportunity to monitor respondents’ interactions on line *in situ*. Over the course of the observational period, I maintained a weekly log of participants’ activities on each of the four focal platforms, tracking changes made to their social media profiles and developing a portfolio of their content for us to analyze together at the second interview time-point. Recognizing that Facebook’s algorithms in particular might act to suppress some content (or to disproportionately highlight other content), I always checked participants’ profiles “at the source” (i.e., instead of in the aggregate or as they appeared in my “feed”). While this approach

may not have enabled me to capture 100% of the content my participants shared -- for example, if they posted a piece of content and then immediately removed it -- I remain confident that it allowed me to capture the majority of participants' content. Of course, I also recognized that not all of participants' *interactions* on social media would be accessible to me using this method -- for instance, their interactions with others in closed or "secret" Facebook groups, or interactions that took place via direct messaging. To help stimulate participants' recall of these experiences, I let them know during the first-round interview encounter that I planned to follow up with them about any arguments or uncomfortable identity-based interactions they'd had with other users over the course of the observation period, and encouraged participants to take special note of these encounters as (and if) they occurred.

Second-Wave Interviews

Second-round interviews were conducted six to twelve months out from each first-round interview session. During these follow-up interviews, participants and I examined specific pieces of content together that had been posted to (or removed from) the respondent's social media profiles over the course of the observation period. We discussed the context behind their decision to post or remove each element, as well as the feedback they may have received for doing so. If particular instances of identity challenge took place over the six-month period between interviews, I also asked participants to reflect upon these experiences: their memories of what took place, how they interpreted this challenge to their identities (both at the time of the encounter and at the time of the interview), and how they had responded. Second-round interviews were also used to follow up with participants on salient themes that had emerged during the first round of interviews. Participants were frequently asked to reflect upon statements that had been made by other participants, or offered quotes from other respondents' interviews and asked for their reactions.

Interviews lasted anywhere from 50 minutes to three hours, with an average length of 115 minutes (just shy of two hours). Owing to the geographic dispersal of participants, interviews were conducted remotely using Blue Jeans (a browser-based videoconferencing program). In cases where respondents were unable to utilize Blue Jeans (due to the speed of their Internet connection, their location, or other technical constraints), a telephone interview was substituted (n = 18, of the 68 total interviews conducted).

Upon completion of the second interview session, I told participants that while no additional data would be collected from their profiles, I would leave it up to them to decide whether or not to “unfriend” me on social media. While a handful of participants did choose to end our connection (n = 3) the majority did not (n = 33), and these participants remained linked to me on at least one platform at the time of this writing. I chose to leave this door open to participants for a variety of reasons. For instance, some social media users have contended that maintaining these kinds of ties to participants enhances their “voice” in the research process, increasing the likelihood of generating findings that contribute to the “public good” (Golder et al 2017). Maintaining a relationship -- even a casual one -- with participants also enhances their ability to hold us *accountable* for our findings, allowing them to follow up with us directly (even months or years after data collection has ended) about conclusions that don’t ring true or elements of their experiences that may have been misrepresented. This kind of accountability can prove especially empowering for participants that are socially stigmatized, or those belonging to identity groups that have historically suffered marginalization *as a consequence of* “outsider”-produced, decontextualized research findings (including TNB+ people).

Retaining a connection to researchers also tends to increase participants’ feelings of involvement and connection to the research, and may render it more likely that they will pursue

opportunities to contribute future insights (or, alternatively, encourage others in their networks to do so). It enables participants to feel “seen” by the researcher -- and, in kind, to feel as though they “see” the researcher as a whole being (rather than as an extension of the research institution itself). This sense of validation can bear dividends throughout the research process, improving rapport and making self-disclosure feel safer. It also helps to remediate some of the power imbalance inherent in the research process, as participants are empowered to “research the researcher” and to make sense of how our research agenda intersects with other domains of our lives. As participant Cameron (22, they/them) phrased it near the end of their interview, “I think staying friends with your respondents is feminist as fuck.”

Of course, there are limits to consider. Some have suggested that extending “friend” requests to research participants may muddy ethical boundaries, misrepresenting the researcher’s intentions or inviting participants to expect an ongoing personal connection with the P.I. However, as Moreno and colleagues (2013) have noted, these concerns may be overstated within the context of today’s social media landscape. They write:

It is important to recognize that the terms ‘friending’ and ‘following’ have very different meanings for those inhabiting today’s social media world. Previous studies have determined that Facebook friending implies a loose-tie relationship, often including associates or acquaintances [Ellison et al 2007]. Further, the absolute number of Facebook friends is often considered a marker of positive social capital [Lin & Lu 2011]. On Twitter, users can be followers of people they have never personally met...thus, both friending and following in and of itself are unlikely to trigger unreasonable expectations for a close or prolonged relationship on the part of participants. (Moreno et al 2013, p. 711)

Given the increasingly informal nature of the Facebook “friendship,” I believe the likelihood of lulling participants into a false sense of intimacy or misrepresenting the nature of our relationship to be relatively low. Moreover, considering the high burden placed on these particular

participants with respect to transparency and self-disclosure, I feel that it is even *more* important here to cultivate transparency with my respondents, returning some of the vulnerability that the research encounter demands of them (and demonstrating my willingness to assume the same interpersonal liabilities). In this sense, while there are *some* risks to remaining “friends” with my informants, I (firmly) believe the benefits of this connection to outweigh them.

Data Analysis and Coding

All data for the project -- screenshots from social media, Qualtrics data, field notes, and interview transcripts -- were collected and analyzed using the QDA software program Dedoose. Following the precepts of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967) and other inductive methodologies, I first read through the dataset in its entirety and conducted a round of “open” coding, during which I generated a code tree and drafted a series of thematic memos on connections that merited further analysis. Subsequent rounds of focused coding were then conducted for each of the central chapters comprising the final dissertation -- seven rounds of coding, in all. I moved back and forth between reviewing the data and drafting new text as I worked on writing the dissertation, ensuring that my interpretation of the data accorded fully with what participants had described. When inconsistencies came to light in the data or further questions arose, I occasionally e-mailed participants to seek further clarification on their responses. I also offered each participant a copy of their interview transcript, thus providing participants with an additional opportunity to correct or extend the answers they’d provided.

Defining the Research Sample

In total, between the initiation of pilot data collection in late 2014 and the completion of second-round, non-pilot interviews in mid-2020, 46 unique participants contributed their insights

to the project. Ten of these participants were considered “pilot” participants: while they were recruited using social media (like other respondents), they weren’t *followed* on social media longitudinally (and, in addition, were only interviewed once). Of the remaining 36 participants -- all of whom were monitored on social media -- 22 were interviewed twice. Four participants either declined to participate in a follow-up interview, or did not respond to attempts to schedule one. The remaining ten participants -- all interviewed for the first time between December 2019 and March 2020 -- did not participate in second-wave interviews, owing to research disruptions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, my total dataset comprises 68 interviews -- 10 pilot interviews, 36 first-round interviews, and 22 second-round interviews -- along with screenshots and other data collected from the social media profiles of the 36 non-pilot participants.

In the chapter that follows, I review the demographics and composition of my sample, describing its composition with respect to gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and age. I also offer a glimpse into how my participants have defined *themselves* -- the language and conceptual foundations they use to anchor their identities, and the ways in which they account for these identities (both to appease others, and for personal benefit).

CHAPTER 3: “I THOUGHT WE WERE ALL ONE BIG HAPPY FAMILY”: SAMPLE COMPOSITION, PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS, AND INTRA-COMMUNITY CONFLICT

When I first met Danny (24, he/him), he was in the final two weeks of run-up to the first stage¹⁵ of his metoidioplasty -- the “last step,” as he phrased it, in the journey he had undertaken to align his body and soul. Already on testosterone for seven years (since the time he turned 18), Danny was lean and muscular, with a thick Freddie-Mercury-style mustache framing his upper lip. When asked to introduce himself, he smirked at me, his eyes sparkling under the rim of his snapback hat. “I’m transsexual, I’m disabled, and I’m a faggot,” he said, proudly. He seemed to wait for me to react.

Danny had been diligently cultivating his masculinity for as long as he could remember. He reflected on how his adolescent friendships had shaped his sense of what it meant to be a man -- boys with “shitty dads” that drank and smoked too much, frat-like communities of “bros,” and “blowhards,” boys that tried to perform a more “sensitive” masculinity -- and how he’d cribbed from their presentations, practicing their postures in the mirror. While he hadn’t always known that trans men existed, he had always known that he wasn’t a girl; puberty brought the dissonance

¹⁵ Phalloplasty and metoidioplasty -- forms of “bottom surgery” available to AFAB people -- are both complex, multiphase procedures, typically involving multiple rounds of surgery. In phalloplasty, for instance, separate surgical procedures are often required to prepare and harvest the skin grafts to be used in construction of the neophallus, to remove natal gonads and close the vagina (if desired), to create the neophallus (often itself a multi-stage procedure, due to the high propensity for complications), to lengthen the urethra, to create a scrotum and insert testicular implants, and so on. While metoidioplasty is generally a more straightforward procedure than phalloplasty (typically involving only two stages), Danny suffered complications after his initial surgery that necessitated further intervention, bringing his final tally of “dick-related surgeries” (in his words!) to three.

between his body and his essence to the forefront of his mind. “It [was] very immediate discomfort with my body changing,” he remembered. “I remember as a kid, like, looking in a mirror, and being, like, ‘why am I what I am?’” He developed anorexia nervosa, starving himself in an effort to shrink his developing chest and hips: “I was always very small-chested, but every time there would be anything more there, I struggled...[and] that’s what I was doing, unfortunately, to counter it.” When he created his first Tumblr account in high school and encountered other TNB+ people, he never looked back. As soon as he moved to Pennsylvania for college (at 17), he bought a chest binder and started testosterone therapy. “I just went for it,” he said, laughing. “[Today], as somebody that’s not friends with me, like -- there’s no markers or anything, like, that would point to me as being trans.”

Near the end of our first session together, I asked Danny whether he’d felt any anxiety about labeling himself as trans -- if he’d wondered whether he was “trans enough,” or whether others would take him seriously as a man. “No, I haven’t,” he said, without a hint of hesitation. “I don’t know. I always, like -- between my figuring out that I was a dude, and starting medically transitioning? There was, like, a very small gap. And there was never really a sense of, like, ‘am I doing the right thing? Am I messing up? Is this the wrong path for me?’ There was always, like, very clearly a ‘this is *not* the right body for me’ type of feeling going on. So there was never really any doubt about that...I just was very solidly set in that, from the start.”

Participant Bradley (18, he/they) -- a slight, quiet university freshman from Vermont -- is also TNB+, but his trajectory has been very different. Like Danny, he uses he/him pronouns, describes himself to others as a trans man, and came out to his friends in the summer between his senior year of high school and his transition into college. However, Bradley -- who also self-describes as non-binary -- has no intention of pursuing medical transition. He has no interest in

taking hormones, doesn't bind his chest, and continues to use a derivation of his birth name on social media. "I'm not trying to say, like, 'ooh, I'm not trans enough,'" he joked in his interview, "but for [other trans people], it's been something that they've known forever, and for me, it's something that I'm just figuring out."

For Bradley, 'figuring out' gender has been an *exploratory* process -- one that's been more about asking questions than about finding answers. While he identifies as a man, he sees no inherent relationship between manhood and masculinity: gender identity and gender expression are completely different concepts, and as a non-binary person, either one of these things could shift for Bradley from one day to the next. On the whole, Bradley has delighted in his exploration of his gender and sexuality, saying, "I do what I want...I wasn't going to fall into any of these models or molds that they had placed for me." But at the same time, he observed that his failure to adhere to the "dominant narrative" of trans experience tended to complicate his interactions with others - even others that he had expected to serve as his allies. For example, he recounted an exercise in his Intro to Women's and Gender Studies course where he was asked to mark his identities on a diagram entitled "The Genderbread Person" -- a gingerbread figure with sliding scales drawn on it to represent different elements of the gender and sexuality spectra (see Figure 3.1). Expecting his instructor to applaud his out-of-the-box approach to the assignment, he was frustrated when she reacted with confusion instead of support:

When I handed her [my WGS professor] my paper with, you know, my Genderbread Person, and my identities way off the page, or as not on [the] line, she goes, 'Bradley, you do know there's a line for gender?' And I say, 'yes.' And she goes, 'well, then why isn't your dot there?' And I say, 'I put it here' [in the corner of the page]. And she goes, 'yes, but the identity line is right here.' And I say, 'I know -- I didn't put it on this line, because my identity does not fall on this line.' And she goes, 'well, there *is* a middle ground,' and I said, 'I understand that there's a middle ground. You know, there's male, female -- there's a whole gray splatter too. My identity does not fall on this line. It falls, you know, at the top right-

hand corner of this paper.' She goes, 'what does that mean?' And I say, 'I have a gender,' and she goes, 'what is it?' And I say... 'it's not a particular thing. It's just not this line.' And she looks at me, and goes, 'this is an Intro class, Bradley. Can we just, like, calm it down?' And I say, 'yes, I understand you want me to 'calm down' my gender, but I'm not gonna put my gender on this line, just because it's an Intro class and you want me to be able to share my identity with other people, because they don't understand it.' Great -- maybe they *don't* understand it, but this is how they're going to learn, is by being -- people like me being like, 'hey, my identity doesn't fall on this line. It falls on the right top-hand corner of this paper.'

The Genderbread Person v4 by its pronounced METROsexual.com

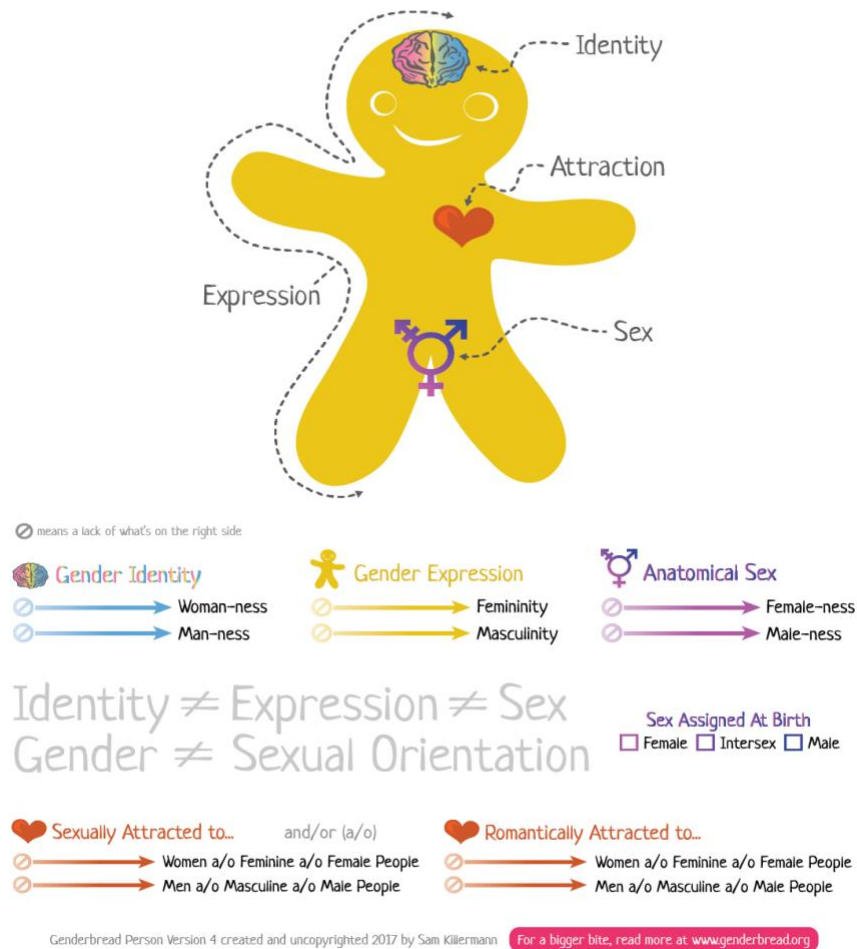


Figure 3.1: “The Genderbread Person” is a popular pedagogical tool, used in introductory sociology and gender studies courses to teach students about the different components of the sex/gender/sexuality system. (Killermann 2017)

While Bradley's decision to label his gender as "off the grid" may have raised his instructor's eyebrows, I can only imagine that she would have been *more* taken aback by participant Cosmo (25, it/they), who used it/its pronouns and described itself as "genderfuck" and "aro-flux," or participant River (23, they/them), who self-described as an "asexual lithromantic omniromantic androgyne." Others, like Ramona (20, they/he), struggled to find *any* label that seemed to encompass their fluctuating, kaleidoscopic experience of gender:

...[First] I hit upon the identity 'demigirl,' which is half girl, half something else. And I was like 'oh! That feels like who I am right now -- I'll stick with that. That sounds like me -- like my 'me.'" And I hung with that identity probably for a good five years or so...[but] I hated the word 'girl' being applied to me by that point, or 'she,' or anything feminine-specific, and it made me want to, like, throw up in my mouth every time I would have to say that my -- you know, like, 'I'm a demigirl,' because I would have to say the word 'girl' and lie to myself. So I was like, 'well, shit -- maybe I'm, like, gender-fluid or something, because my gender changes day-to-day.' Like, I can go through -- I wake up one morning and the gender can be 'mostly masculine with a feminine twist,' or it can be 'hyper-feminine,' or it can be 'question mark.' And it can even fluctuate on the hour, sometimes.

While Ramona cycled through an ever-evolving rotation of different (but equally intense) gender "feelings," participant Kai (22, they/she/he) struggled to pinpoint *any* gender-specific feelings at all. Diagnosed as intersex in childhood, Kai was placed on feminizing hormones at puberty (first without their knowledge, and then against their will). Ultimately settling upon the labels "agender" and "non-binary," Kai felt uncomfortable presenting or being referred to as a woman, but also didn't feel a strong enough perception of masculinity to feel comfortable self-describing as trans. For Kai, gender presentation was a *tool* that could be manipulated to meet different sorts of social needs -- not an innate or intuitive 'essence':

As I got older, and I got [told I was] intersex and stuff, a lot of stuff clicked...they put me on feminine hormones, without my permission, and I didn't really get to pick if I wanted

to do, like, male hormones...[and] basically, I'm addicted to [the feminine hormones] now...I become such an asshole if I don't take them. And it's, like -- they help my skin be better, and, like, I know if I start a transition for T or anything, my skin would be really bad. And that's the only -- that's one of the reasons why I won't do it. The intersex hormones make me pretty, and so I still take them religiously, because I'm really into skin care and stuff...[and] if the only thing that's keeping me from transition[ing] to a male is skin care, then I guess I don't really care, you know? My identity isn't really caught up in it...it just feels like a mask I could put on, I guess, for fun...I tried really hard to look gender-neutral, or at least as guy-ish as possible, in high school...but when I got older, I felt like a lot of people would avoid me because I was more in the middle [in terms of my presentation]...I started presenting more femininely, because I feel like it gets me what I want more, if that makes sense...if I present as feminine, then people will, like, take me as feminine, and it's like, 'yes, this is part of my plan.' You know?

Thus, in some ways, Kai found their feminine presentation to be empowering -- perhaps more so than intentionally presenting as gender-ambiguous had proven to be. At the same time, however, Kai noted that their failure to present as masculine -- and, accordingly, their failure to adhere to TNB+ stereotype -- had made them a target of harassment and abuse, much of it perpetrated by other trans and non-binary people. "In one [online] group, there were a lot of trans guys who were like, 'uhh, if you're feminine, you don't belong in our group. You can't relate to our struggle, so get out,'" they remembered. "Non-binary people -- they're kind of in the middle. I feel like they're not considered '100% real trans,' sometimes -- like, especially if you say you're non-binary, but you look really feminine or really masculine. People are less likely to, like, take you seriously. Like, one person I know [said], like, 'oh, non-binary people are just cis people trying to get into the community and steal our resources.' And I was like, 'what resources?'" Laughing, Kai sighed, "I didn't know that trans people disliked other kinds of trans people, you know? I thought we were all a big happy family. But I guess we're not."

* * *

The landscape of LGBTQ+ identity production is sprawling, diverse, and ever-changing, and TNB+ identities are certainly no exception. As trans and gender non-conforming young people become increasingly visible, the cultural narratives emerging around TNB+ experience are evolving in kind. To avoid framing trans experience as monolithic and to ensure that participants’ experiences are accurately represented, it is important that the reader understand the identity labels that young people today deploy to describe themselves, and develop a sense of how these descriptors interrelate.

In this chapter, I provide a demographic overview of my sample, explaining how my participants break down with respect to gender, sexual identity, race, and educational attainment (among other dimensions). A comprehensive overview of the sample’s demographics is presented in Table 1, below. This chapter also charts the terrain of my participants’ social landscape, illustrating how these demographic factors intersect to shape participants’ experiences in TNB+-focused spaces. I describe how today’s TNB+ youth construct, negotiate, and reinforce *boundaries* between the different identity groups clustered under the “trans umbrella,” and elaborate the historical and political *roots* of some of these boundaries, laying in a foundation to contextualize the intra-community tensions that will be discussed in later chapters.

Table 1: Demographic Overview

#	Pseudonym	Age	Racial Identities	Location	Gender Identities	Sexual Identities	Pronouns	Platforms of Interest
1	Emerson*	20	White	Michigan	Trans; genderqueer; nonbinary	Queer	They/them	**
2	Willow*	22	White	Illinois	Trans; genderfluid	Pansexual	She/her or they/them	**
3	Rebecca*	25	White	Michigan	Trans; trans woman	Questioning	She/her	**

4	Gina*	25	White	Texas	Trans; trans woman	Lesbian	She/her	**
5	Ariel*	23	White	North Carolina	Trans; trans woman	Heterosexual	She/her	**
6	Chloe*	20	Multiracial	California	Trans; trans woman	“Heteroflexible”	She/her	**
7	Ben*	19	White	Kentucky	Trans; trans man; transmasculine	Pansexual	He/him or they/them	**
8	Connor*	24	White	Washington	Trans; trans man; transmasculine	Queer	He/him	**
9	Hayden*	21	Multiracial	Georgia	Trans; trans man	Pansexual	He/him	**
10	Casey*	22	Native American	Arizona	Trans; genderqueer; nonbinary	Queer	They/them	**
11	Avery	22	White	Maryland	Trans; agender; nonbinary; genderfluid	Demisexual; pansexual; panromantic; polyamorous	They/them	Facebook; Instagram; Tumblr; Discord; Snapchat; Pinterest; LinkedIn; IMVU; P-Tracker
12	Crystal	19	White	Illinois	Trans; gender non-conforming; questioning; trans woman	Heterosexual; “gynephilic”	She/her	Facebook; Instagram; Tumblr; Twitter; Discord; Snapchat
13	Brynn	22	White	Virginia	Trans; gender non-conforming; nonbinary; trans femme	Gay; demisexual	They/them and she/her	Instagram; Tumblr
14	Lyric	19	White	Virginia	Trans; nonbinary	Bisexual; queer	They/them	Facebook; Instagram; Tumblr; Twitter; Reddit; Discord
15	Dov*	23	White	Oregon	Trans; nonbinary; bigender; genderfluid	Bisexual	They/them	Facebook; Instagram; Tumblr; Twitter
16	Fern*	22	White	Massachusetts	Trans; nonbinary	Queer	They/them	Facebook; Instagram; Tumblr; Reddit; Snapchat
17	River*	23	White	California	Trans; nonbinary; intersex	Omnioromantic; lithromantic; asexual	They/them	Facebook; Tumblr; Twitter; DeviantArt; Pinterest
18	Malachi	20	Multiracial	Massachusetts	Nonbinary; transmasculine; trans man; demiboy	Queer	He/him or they/them	Facebook; Twitter; Reddit; Instagram; Tumblr
19	Bradley	18	White	Vermont	Nonbinary; trans; transmasculine	Queer; gay; heteroromantic	He/him and they/them	Facebook; Instagram; Twitter
20	Ramona	20	White	Iowa	Trans; nonbinary; genderfluid; femme	Lesbian; “Sapphic”	They/them and he/him	Facebook; Tumblr; Peach

21	Kai	22	White	Oklahoma	Agender; non-binary; femme	Bisexual	They/them, she/her or he/his	Facebook; Instagram; Tumblr
22	Charlotte	21	White	Iowa	Trans; trans woman; femme	Lesbian	She/her or they/them	Tumblr; Peach; Snapchat; Discord
23	Sophia	23	White	Virginia	Trans woman	Gay; demisexual	She/her	Facebook; Instagram; Tumblr; Twitter
24	Rigby	23	White	Iowa	Trans; transmasculine	Queer; gay	He/him or they/them	Facebook; Instagram; Twitter; Reddit
25	Xan	20	Multiracial	Texas	Trans; transmasculine; non-binary	Asexual	He/him or they/them	Facebook; Instagram; Twitter
26	Presley	22	White	Kentucky	Trans; genderfluid; nonbinary	Grey-asexual	They/them	Facebook; Instagram; Tumblr; Twitter; Discord
27	Danny	24	Multiracial	Pennsylvania	“Transsexual”; transmasculine; trans man	Gay	He/him	Facebook; Instagram; Tumblr; Reddit
28	Cameron	22	Multiracial	Virginia	Trans; nonbinary; genderfluid	Bisexual	They/them	Facebook; Instagram; Twitter; Tumblr
29	Cassidy	18	White	Ohio	Trans woman; trans	Asexual	She/her	Facebook; Instagram; Twitter; Reddit; Discord; Whisper; Snapchat
30	Milo	21	White	Texas	Trans; nonbinary; transmasculine	Polyamorous; pansexual	He/him or they/them	Facebook; Instagram; Discord
31	Lee	25	White	Texas	Trans; nonbinary; agender; “agenderflux”	Asexual	They/them	Facebook; Instagram; Tumblr; Twitter
32	Izzy*	18	White	Minnesota	Nonbinary	Queer	They/them or she/her	Facebook; Instagram; Twitter
33	Sebastian	20	White	Illinois	Trans; nonbinary; genderqueer; transmasculine; trans man	Gay	They/them	Facebook; Instagram; Twitter
34	Jo	22	White	Florida	Agender; nonbinary	Bisexual	They/them or she/her	Facebook; Twitter; Reddit
35	Jayde	24	White	Iowa	Trans woman; nonbinary	Bisexual	She/her	Facebook; Twitter
36	Topher*	22	White	Michigan	Trans; transmasculine; trans man	Queer	He/him	Facebook; Instagram; Twitter; GroupMe
37	Luca*	18	Multiracial	Georgia	Transmasculine	Queer	He/him	Facebook; Instagram; Tumblr; Reddit

38	Kyrie*	21	White	Massachusetts	Trans; nonbinary	Asexual; panromantic	They/them or she/her	Facebook; Instagram; Tumblr; Twitter; Pinterest; TikTok
39	Julian*	19	Multiracial	Oklahoma	Trans; trans man	Bisexual; pansexual	He/him	Facebook; Discord; Quotev
40	Cosmo*	25	Multiracial	Ohio	Trans; nonbinary; genderqueer	Pansexual; queer; demisexual	It/its or they/them	Facebook; Instagram; Tumblr; Twitter
41	Vinny*	22	White	Ohio	Trans; nonbinary; femme	Lesbian	They/them	Facebook; Instagram; Tumblr; Twitter; Reddit; TikTok
42	Marcel*	22	White	Maryland	Transmasculine; trans; nonbinary	Bisexual	He/him or they/them	Facebook; Instagram
43	Charlie*	24	White	Arkansas	Trans; nonbinary; transmasculine; gender non-conforming	Demisexual	He/him or they/them	Facebook; Instagram; Reddit; Pinterest
44	Aurora*	23	White	Michigan	Trans; trans woman	Queer; lesbian	She/her	Facebook; Tumblr; Twitter; Discord
45	Parker*	19	White	Wisconsin	Trans; nonbinary; femme; gender-neutral	Demisexual	They/them or she/her	Facebook; Instagram; Tumblr; Twitter; Reddit; Vent
46	Violet*	21	White	Florida	Trans; trans woman	Lesbian	She/her	Facebook; Instagram; Tumblr; Twitter; Reddit; Discord
47	Lily†	28	White	Maine	Trans; trans woman	Lesbian	She/her	**
48	Walt†	27	White	Ohio	Trans; trans man	Heterosexual	He/him	**
49	Tony†	26	White	California	Trans; trans man	Queer; bisexual	He/him	**
50	Marilyn†	26	White	New Mexico	Genderfluid; non-binary	Gay; queer	She/her	**
51	Jem†	38	White	California	Trans; trans man; non-binary; genderqueer	Queer	He/him	**
52	Sam†	29	Multiracial	Illinois	Genderqueer; non-binary	Queer	He/him	**

* = Participant completed first-wave interview only (due to pilot status, inability to recontact, or COVID-19)

** = Pilot participant; not followed on social media

† = Pilot participant exceeding target age range; data used only in Chapter 4 (pilot study)

‘Trans’ 101

To make sense of the breakdown of my sample with respect to gender and sexuality, it is first important to establish some preliminary definitions. One thing that should be understood from the outset is that “transgender” is an *umbrella term* -- a term encapsulating a *spectrum* of identities and experiences. Where the word “transgender” -- or its ancestor, the now-disparaged “transsexual” -- once referred almost exclusively to those who sought to transition from one binary gender role into “the other,” the term “trans” is now claimed by people who relate to the existing gender binary in a variety of different ways. Today’s trans young people may or may not identify within the context of the existing gender system (i.e., as “men” or “women”); they may or may not elect a new name, or new pronouns, or change their appearance or style of dress; they may or may not pursue medical transition (whether they identify as men/women, or not). They may possess multiple gender identities, overlapping and shifting into one another with the passage of time; they may also describe themselves as having no gender at all. Some are happy to assimilate themselves into the existing gender system; others actively reject this system, seeking to transform or to end it; still others occupy a middle ground, both critical of the existing gender system and stymied by its seeming inevitability, unsure of how to render themselves visible in its absence.

It is important to recognize that even *binary*-aligned transgender people make diverse choices with respect to physical presentation, social presentation, and medical transition. Some trans men and trans women take hormones or undergo surgery to alter their bodies; others do not. Access to medical transition is itself fraught for many reasons. In spite of new state and institutional protections meant to safeguard LGBTQ people against employment discrimination (Liptak 2020), trans and non-binary people continue to face bias and mistreatment in the workforce -- they are less likely to be hired (Leppel 2021; Grant et al 2011), earn lower wages when they are

(Carpenter et al 2020; Schilt & Wiswall 2008), are less likely to be placed into higher-paying customer-facing positions (McFadden 2020; Van Borm & Baert 2018), and are more likely to have their employment terminated without cause (Grant et al 2011). A 2015 survey conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality (James et al 2016) found that trans and non-binary people face an unemployment rate that triples that of the cisgender public; Grant and colleagues (2011), working with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, find that 47% of respondents reported having been denied a job offer or turned down for promotion due to their gender identity or presentation, and over a quarter (26%) had been fired for the same. Ongoing familial discrimination means that trans people -- and trans young people in particular -- are more likely to be homeless (Hail-Jares 2021; Vandenburg et al 2021; Robinson 2020) and less likely to inherit familial wealth. These factors coalesce to make trans and gender non-conforming people -- as a collective -- overwhelmingly financially insecure. Many (particularly within the U.S. context) struggle to gain access to insurance; without insurance, there's no way to cover costs, which can be exorbitant, especially for surgery. Even those that *have* insurance frequently find that their desired procedures are not covered, or are treated as elective (WPATH 2016). One recent NCTE report states that 55% of trans and non-binary people who sought coverage for transition-related procedures from their insurance companies were ultimately denied (James et al 2016). Many trans young people are tasked with paying out of pocket for their medical care, crowdfunding online or selling artwork (and similar) to pay for treatment (Barcelos 2019).

Even with the financial resources to afford treatment, many trans and non-binary people struggle to access medical care. Some -- particularly those living in rural or conservative areas -- may be unable to locate providers willing to treat them (Knutson 2018; Davis 2001). Non-binary people, too, often struggle to access medical transition (especially surgical care), finding that their

lack of dysphoria or their non-traditional “goals” for treatment foreclose their access to care (Lykens et al 2018). Other trans people are unable to access medical transition due to their existing health status. For example, Ramona (20, they/he), who had been previously diagnosed with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome -- a connective tissue disorder that can cause issues with wound healing -- was disheartened to learn that their condition rendered them a poor candidate for surgery: “...I have such poor collagen that, like, bottom surgery would not work, because my skin is too weak to be, you know -- like, to have that, like, graft procedure [for phalloplasty]...so that’s not an option for me, unfortunately.” Cameron (22, they/them), too, was unable to access hormones due to a pre-existing health issue, explaining:

I can’t take T, because it would kill me...[and] that ruined me. Finding out that, like, I’m really, really strongly not a good candidate for HRT bummed me out...finding that out really kind of crushed my dreams of presenting the way I really, really wanted to. But after a certain point of being miserable about it, instead of kind of letting myself wallow in that, I thought about maybe non-traditional ways I could look the way I wanted to.

Finally, there are some trans people -- including binary-aligned trans people -- that choose not to transition at all. Many trans people choose not to disclose their identities to the public; remaining closeted (or “detransitioning” for safety purposes, as participant Xan (20, he/they) was forced to do following a string of serious harassment and stalking events) represents another factor that can dissuade people from pursuing medical or social transition, even where they might otherwise seek to do so. There are also many trans people who have no *interest* in changing their bodies. Accounts that frame trans people as having been “born in the wrong body” -- while persistent, and often deeply persuasive for cohorts of cisgender people that would otherwise perceive trans identity as an artifact of mental illness -- are themselves great sources of social harm

for trans people (Mock 2012; Bettcher 2014). As Munroe Bergdorf (a patron of “Mermaids,” a non-profit advocacy group for trans youth living in the UK) explained:

I’ve come to understand why the phrase ‘born in the wrong body’ is unhelpful to me. I know why I used to use it; because other people struggled to understand. But looking back, I know it did me harm. Saying you have the wrong body feels like a kind of self-abuse, and it’s not the same as saying ‘I need to adjust my body to be my true self’...we only get one body, and it’s really important, especially for younger people, to know they are unique and beautiful. I would say to younger people that transitioning is hard, so you need to look after your body, love it, and respect it. (Mermaids 2020)

In recent years, a sea change has taken place with respect to dysphoria-centered (and, in particular, *body-dysphoria* centered) accounts of trans identity. Non-binary, genderqueer, and gender-fluid young people have been instrumental in precipitating this shift, with many arguing that dysphoria should be de-centralized as an anchor of trans identity (and that gender *euphoria* -- the feelings of *joy* and *pleasure* that may accompany particular forms of gender expression -- should be centered in its stead). It is to this issue that we next turn.

Non-Binary 101

As stated above, many people that identify as trans don’t position themselves within the context of the existing gender system -- they don’t necessarily describe themselves as “men” or “women.” People whose experience of gender is not adequately captured by the masculine/feminine binary are referred to as *non-binary*. As exploring gender presentation has become an increasingly accessible option for many (and less socially stigmatized -- at least, for some populations), it is becoming more common for people to adopt identity labels that defy or transcend the binary gender system. A recent Williams Institute study -- one of the first to attempt a demographic analysis of non-binary Americans -- has estimated that there are over 1.2 million

non-binary people living in the U.S. today (Wilson & Meyer 2021). As is typical for new identity labels, young people have been among the quickest to adopt this descriptor, with new data from the Trevor Project (2021) revealing that over a quarter (26%) of LGBTQ+ youth now describe themselves as non-binary (and another 20% indicating that they were “not sure” or were “questioning” whether this label might be appropriate for them).

The term “non-binary” is *itself* an umbrella term -- it shouldn't be seen to imply a position *directly between* existing binary gender categories, or as a “blend” or “hybrid” of masculinity and femininity. Some people *do*, of course, experience gender in this way -- for example, bigender people, who might describe themselves as possessing both masculine/male or feminine/female identities simultaneously, or some gender-fluid people, who might move back and forth between these binary positions. Others may conceptualize themselves as *partially* or *contextually* “male” or “female” -- as, for instance, some who describe themselves as “demigender” do. Still others describe themselves as devoid of gender altogether, or perceive themselves as “absent” of gender (for instance, some agender people). Others' experience of gender may be even more complex, as participant Cosmo (25, it/they) described:

I don't lean EITHER way. I don't even consider myself on the spectrum. I'm just -- the spectrum's here, and I'm all the way over there, going -- [shrugs] So. Um, it was, uh -- it was a slow process with [figuring out] the non-binary stuff, until I picked up more identity labels that fit, and those evolved too -- like, um, 'androgynous,' 'genderpunk,' 'genderfuck,' and so on. And now I'm at a place where I don't really know what to call my gender, specifically -- all I know is that it's mine. There's nothing else like it. The closest I've been able to get is, um -- ancient Judaism had six genders, and one of them was, um, *tumtum*, which means 'hidden' or 'concealed.' You can't -- it kind of describes someone whose gender you can't determine from a glance, and maybe *they* don't even know their own gender. *They* don't know how to describe it to you. So that's -- that's the closest I get, almost.

Many non-binary people also describe themselves as transgender, irrespective of their desire to transition (either socially, or medically). For example, participant Bradley (18, he/they) - who identifies both as non-binary and as trans -- explained that while he doesn't consider himself to be "a man" and has no intention to transition, he conceptualizes himself as trans because the gender category he inhabits now (non-binary) differs from the category to which he was assigned at birth (female):

For me, being trans is just transitioning from whatever you identify as now, into just something else -- it doesn't necessarily have to be from male to female, or female to male. I could identify as nonbinary today, but male tomorrow, and for me, that's a transition. Um, and so I usually use the term trans as 'I've transitioned from being female to nonbinary,' but I've also transitioned from being *nothing*, or being non-binary *to* nothing.

Some people may identify both as non-binary AND as men or women simultaneously. However, those that claim multiple identities often find that their identities as non-binary are elided or obscured by outside observers, who tend to cling to binary identity categories as a source of interactional stability. Since the non-binary identity label is a (relatively) new addition to our cultural landscape, we lack salient *cultural signifiers* to connote non-binary identity (as will be further discussed in Chapter 4); as a result, many non-binary people find that their identities are "missed" or overlooked in their interactions with others, resulting in their being lapsed into binary categories against their will. At the same time, those who are attached to their identities as men or as women may find that identifying as non-binary casts those claims into question. For example, participant Jayde (24, she/her) noted that while her own subjective experience of gender 'feels' non-binary, she is often reluctant to disclose this dimension of her identity to members of the public, fearing that such disclosure would render it harder for observers to perceive her as a woman:

I would feel kind of accurate with [calling myself] non-binary, but I also don't feel like I would feel any kind of, like, particular comfort at being referred to as a non-binary person, in some ways? I also think...like, socially, amongst people, like, my grip on 'womanhood' is tenuous at best -- you know, the way, like, the general 'mainstream' society views me...personally, I would identify myself as both non-binary and a trans woman. But I will always, like -- I only tell *some* people that I'm non-binary, because, like -- I want, like, my womanhood to be, like, the main thing, right? There are parts of the world that would gladly, you know, strip me of that...we're not going to see gender end, like, within my lifetime, you know, [so] I would continue calling myself a woman, and everything.

Of course, just as trans people may or may not identify as non-binary, it is equally important to recognize that non-binary people do not *necessarily* self-describe as trans. In this sample, there were three non-binary participants -- Izzy, Kai, and Kyrie -- that rejected the "trans" identity label, explaining that this label didn't adequately contextualize their experiences. However (and as these participants' narratives suggest), motivations for refusing the "trans" label differ from person to person. Some view trans identity and non-binary identity as conceptually distinct, defining "trans" status as synonymous with attachment to a binary label like "man" or "woman," as participant Izzy (18, they/she) did:

Interviewer: Was there ever a moment, as you were thinking about and exploring your own identity, where you wondered whether you *were* trans, or whether that was a label that was appropriate for you?

Izzy: No. I feel pretty, like -- not even masculine, because I never really felt, like, 'masculine,' if that makes sense. But I feel pretty androgynous...it's an internal feeling, for me, that, like, I just don't feel like I'm a female, [or] I'm a male, [or] that I'm more masculine, more feminine. I just -- I just am.

Others in my sample, like Kai (22, they/she/he), indicated that they *might* self-describe as trans, were it not for intra-community tensions causing them to worry that they might not be trans *enough*. (This issue is described in more detail in Chapter 4.)

You see people transitioning, posting pictures of their top surgery, flying trans flags at Pride and stuff like that. It's, like -- I could *never* do that. I live in a little tiny city [in Oklahoma], and nobody here cares about anybody like that. And, like -- it feels like [those people are] much more involved in the community, and they have more right to say things than you do...like, since I'm agender, when trans people say things about gender or whatever, I just, like, kind of listen, because I don't feel like I'm qualified enough...it's kind of different...I'm afraid of doing anything permanent -- like, doing anything medically permanent. I don't want people being, like, 'well, why do you want to be a woman again?'...[so] I don't feel like it enough, and having all these other people around you, like, setting goals or transitioning and doing all that other stuff, it just feels like you're not really involved enough to be considered part of the community, I guess.

While Kai had no interest in medical transition, non-binary trans people -- just like binary-aligned trans people -- make highly individualized decisions about how and whether to modify their bodies. Some pursue medical transition, while others do not. Of the 28 non-binary participants in my sample (including both pilot and non-pilot participants), exactly half (n =14) had accessed medical transition in some capacity. Of those that *had* accessed medical transition, some had undertaken permanent interventions (for example, having chest surgery, as Malachi (20, he/they) did, or taking hormones for many years, like Jayde (24, she/her)); others took more provisional steps (for instance, "micro-dosing" or taking lower-than-average doses of hormones, like Avery (22, they/them) did, or taking hormones for an interval of time and then stopping, as Sebastian (20, they/them) did). Within this context, the decision to stop HRT represents a *continuation* of the non-binary person's evolution, rather than a desistance -- a distinction that might be missed by the Lisa Littmans and Abigail Shriers of the world (who are generally all too keen to cite these cases as examples of "detransition"). Sebastian (20, they/them), for instance, expressed what Shrier (2020) might have contextualized as a "classic" detransition narrative in their interview session, explaining that they felt regret about pursuing testosterone therapy, but remained emphatic about continuing to identify as trans:

I 100% regret doing hormone replacement therapy. Like, I'm not -- I'm not angry at myself for it. I don't feel guilty, like I do for a lot of things I regret. But I would not have *ever* gone on testosterone, if I knew what I know now. But I *can't* [have known]...[and] I'm still trans. I identify as trans more strongly than I identify as non-binary...I feel 'trans enough.' I'm not worried. Like, so much of the past two years of my life have been defined by trans experience [that] the last thing I'm going to worry about is being trans enough...I [just] didn't want to identify as non-binary. I [still] do not want to be non-binary. I do not *want* to identify as non-binary. The only reason that I *do* identify as non-binary is I ask myself 'am I a man or a woman?' And I say, 'no.'

Sebastian's reflection is revealing on a number of levels. For one, it highlights the reality that many who desist from medical transition -- and even many who express open *regret* about the changes they've made to their bodies -- do *not* in fact go on to identify publicly as their natal sex, but instead go on to identify (or *continue* to identify) as non-binary or genderqueer. For another, it suggests that the misplaced desire to pursue medical transition is (at least in some cases) *not* a consequence of being "seduced" (in Shrier's (2020) language) by members of the trans "cult," but rather an outgrowth of *reluctance* to identify as *non-binary*, or an artifact of internalized prejudice against non-binary people. Both are important considerations that those who would propagate moral panic about detransition tend to elide.

Gender Identity vs. Gender Expression

As the preceding sections attest, participants in this sample used a variety of different labels to describe their experience of gender. However, it is also important to recognize that gender *identity* -- the word or label that a person uses to describe their internal, subjective experience of gender -- is only one aspect of the social composite that we call "gender." Another important element is a person's gender *expression* -- the ways in which a person signals or "performs" (Butler 1990) their gender in interactions with others. For instance, our manner of dress, the length and

style of our hair, the makeup we wear (or don't), our body language, and the tone and pacing of our speech can all be used to *express* gender. As West and Zimmerman (1987) describe, since the physiological characteristics that are used to determine sex category (e.g., chromosomes; genitalia) aren't generally visible to others in day-to-day social life, these secondary signals are what we rely upon to *attribute* gender to others whose gender identity is unknown.

While a person's gender identity and gender expression will often overlap, it should never be *presumed* that the two will align. Both cisgender and transgender people might choose to experiment with their gender presentation, either provisionally or on a long-term basis. Some trans and non-binary people do nothing to change their presentation at all. Avery (22, they/them), for example, explained that they feel it is often "more acceptable to just keep existing" as a non-binary person than it is as a trans person, since the non-binary identity label doesn't carry the same expectation of physical transformation that the trans identity label often does:

I feel like it is more acceptable if you identify as non-binary to just keep existing...if you're, you know, female-to-male trans, male-to-female trans, you know -- whatever you're, you know, doing -- then people expect you transition, and then that's a little -- there's more of the stigma of, like...[if you say] 'oh, I don't want to,' then people are like, 'well, you fucking said you were trans! What are you doing?'...[whereas] I know, shit, at least six people in my close friend group that are technically non-binary, but also, like, never talk about it, ever. They tell me it's because they literally don't care -- they're like, 'I'm technically non-binary, but it's whatever.'

The expectation that trans people will change their physical presentation can motivate many binary-aligned trans people to *emphasize* their masculinity or femininity -- with varying consequences. For trans women, emphasizing femininity tends to reinforce the appearance that one is demure, vulnerable, and non-threatening: attributes that can place them at social risk, or render them susceptible to pressure and abuse. In turn, emphasizing *masculinity* can reinforce

perceptions of trans men as “toxic” or as embracing hegemonic masculinity -- traits that can lead queer women and non-binary people to reject them, or to view them as potential abusers. As Malachi (20, he/they) explained, drawing from his own experiences as a transmasculine person at an all-women’s college:

I *never* want to be referred to as a ‘man’...I’ve experienced a lot of violence, and, like, [I’ve] witnessed a lot of violence by cis men, and by [other] men, you know? And to me, it’s, like, associated with this kind of, like -- like, you know, this kind of domination of space, and access to women's bodies, and things like that. And I think, like, I really want to distance myself, like, linguistically and also, like...just in terms of the way I present myself, from that...I, like, definitely had a period of time when I first came out, where I was, like, reinstating my masculinity and reinforcing it by being really disrespectful to women, and, like, dating specific -- like, women who look a specific way, and almost, like, commodifying them, as kind of, like, a tool to get people to legitimize me...

In an effort to circumvent or disrupt these perceptions, many of the trans men and transmasculine people in this sample described intentionally “softening” their presentation or trying to “queer” their masculinity, emphasizing to others that their masculinity was non-threatening. Topher (22, he/him), for example, said “Society has set up very rigid hyperfeminine standards and very rigid hypermasculine standards, and a lot of trans folks -- not everyone, but a lot -- trade one for the other...not really feeling like they have the autonomy, really, or the ability to blend that. I often think about, like, whether we think of that ‘blending’ as automatically being non-binary. But, like, cis women have worn suits...they’ve worn jeans and pants forever, and they’re still women. But for some reason, like, if men wear dresses, or wear makeup, or do anything that is stereotypically feminine...[it’s] one drop, and you’ve ruined the whole thing. I guess that’s kind of what I’m trying to challenge.” However, as participant Dov (23, they/them) keenly reflected, *because* of the increased stigma directed against men that express femininity, claiming

even a *little* femininity can go a long way toward covering over a masculine person's other sins (particularly for *cis* men):

There's the idea that masculinity is inherently harmful, and that's really deeply embedded in my community -- which is a huge bummer for all of the people who can't just go out and get a new gender, and exist as some sort of masculine person. And so the idea is that visually reducing your masculinity reduces your ability to do violence towards other people, or to be sexually violent, or to be, like, a gross bro...it's just sort of the prioritization of visual non-masculinity over behaviorally refusing to reproduce harmful behaviors associated with men...so you can be, like, Ye Olde Garbage Man, and just, like, sexually harass people, and be loud and annoying and talk over women and fight with your female professors, but, you know, if you, like, paint your fingernails, it's like, 'wow -- you're pretty radical!'

“Blending” or intermingling masculine and feminine signifiers is *also* a tactic leveraged by many non-binary and genderqueer people -- particularly those that hope to be read as androgynous, or that hope to defy consistent gender categorization. As noted above (and further discussed in Chapter 4), even non-binary people who engage in this kind of “blending” are often inadvertently misrecognized as men or women (e.g., Garrison 2018), owing to the lack of stable cultural signifiers to convey non-binary identity. However -- and interestingly -- interviews with this sample suggested this situation may be evolving. Many participants were quite readily able to describe particular hairstyles, accessories, or other self-presentational choices that they believed to “signal” non-binary identity. In a poignant reflection, participant Dov (23, they/them) described these signals as closely related to other types of “queer” signifiers, framing them as having emerged from a context of cis-het rejection. They noted -- with no small amount of resentment -- that where they had once looked to people that seemed to embrace styles and accessories that cis-

hets had castigated¹⁶ as “ugly,” the relentless consumption and re-appropriation of queer culture by cis-het people had rendered this project more challenging:

It’s anything that’s, like, visibly gender non-conforming -- like, someone you think is a girl having hairy legs and armpits, or someone you think is a guy having painted nails or wearing a skirt. [But] it can be lots of other stuff. The septum rings used to be a dead giveaway, but now the straights have decided they’re pretty too. It’s basically things that mainstream culture thinks are kind of ugly? Like, now, mullets are kind of a queer signal - - and, like, they’re ugly, but they’re now a signal, so I appreciate them. And, like, I don’t think that, like, mainstream white [cis-het] culture thought septum rings were very cool, and so the gays were like, ‘this is ours now. It’s ugly and so it’s for us.’ Um, and then the straights were like, ‘ooh -- there are some cool people doing some cool stuff [with this]. What if *this* was for us, also?’

Other participants pointed to styles and habits that seemed to connote non-binary status more specifically. For example, the “undercut” -- a relatively gender-neutral hairstyle where hair is shaved short on the back and sides of the head, but kept longer on top -- was referenced in interviews repeatedly as a “signal” of non-binary status. Participant Presley (22, they/them) noted that both they *and* their non-binary partner, Shay, had sported this hairstyle (sometimes simultaneously):

Presley: Everyone likes to point out that [my partner] Shay and I have the same haircut. Uh, it’s exactly the same -- mine’s just longer on top.

Interviewer: Yeah -- and is that ‘the’ haircut?

Presley: Yeah -- it kind of is! You see it a *lot*. It’s becoming more and more prevalent, it feels like...you see it all over, [on] non-binary and genderqueer folk.

¹⁶ See Hebdige 1979, which offers an excellent accounting of the role of style/aesthetic as “symbolic resistance” to this kind of normalizing threat.

While participant Cameron (22, they/them) also referenced the undercut as a signifier, they also built out a string of additional signals that they had seen accompany the undercut, each of which lent its own layer of emphasis to the bearer's status as non-binary: "Undercuts are queer. Septum piercings are queer...if you have an undercut *and* a septum piercing, you're probably non-binary. Dark lipstick can help you flag as non-binary, as a femme...[or] thin people in skinny jeans and Converse." Rigby's (23, he/they) list -- in many ways an echo of Cameron's -- added additional nuance, asserting:

[Yes], there's the haircut, like, where you shave the sides of your head, but the top is all long and floppy...I've definitely known, like, four or five people who've got that haircut...[but there's also] only dyeing the top of your head. That pose where you put one foot up on the sink when you take a selfie. Overalls, on anyone. Short nails that are painted...snapback [hats]. Like, fanny packs, and those Hawaiian shirts that dads wear. Those are my -- my things that I'm looking for."

The emergence of these consistent non-binary signifiers -- septum piercings, the undercut, the "pose where you put one foot up on the sink," and the like -- can be attributed almost solely to the emergence of social media. Where those displaying these signals in a pre-Internet era would have been easily misrecognized, online tagging practices (i.e., the ability to "hashtag" particular images or pieces of text with identity-specific labels or phrases) and the increased visibility of identity labels online have made it much easier to identify non-binary people *as* non-binary. At the same time, as users scroll through the content collated under the "non-binary" or "genderqueer" hashtags, they gain a sense of the styles and aesthetics that are repeatedly represented: the foundational familiarity that is necessary for cultural signifiers to form and propagate. In this sense, the affordances offered by social media platforms like Instagram and Tumblr have made non-

binary identities *visible* to the public in ways that would have been impossible to realize pre-Web 2.0.

Pronoun Usage

One of the first steps that many TNB+ people take toward changing their gender presentation is adopting a new set of personal pronouns. However, as the preceding sections should suggest, this process isn't always as straightforward as swapping 'he' for 'she.' While many trans people -- both binary-aligned *and* non-binary -- *do* settle on the "classic" binary pronouns ('he/him/his' or 'she/her/hers'), increased public recognition of non-binary people has expanded the pool of available pronouns substantially.

One contestant that has entered (or, rather, re-entered -- see Zimmer 2015) the scene is the singular form of 'they' -- the pronoun most often preferred by non-binary participants in this sample (with 19 such participants electing 'they' as their first-listed pronoun of choice). This option has gained considerable institutional traction in recent years, rising to such prominence that Merriam-Webster named the pronoun their 2019 Word of the Year (Steinmetz 2019). Recent survey data collected by The Trevor Project (2020a) suggests that 21% of LGBTQ youth between the ages of 13 and 24 use they/them pronouns, either exclusively (5%) or in conjunction with binary pronouns like he/him or she/hers (16%).

The use of auxiliary pronouns can be a source of confusion for cisgender people working to interpret trans people's positionality (and, indeed, for some transgender people, too). Outside observers may wonder, for instance, whether a non-binary person that uses both they/them *and* she/hers pronouns is "really" non-binary, or if the person is in fact moving towards (or, alternatively, clinging to) a binary subjectivity. However, TNB+ people might deploy auxiliary pronouns for many reasons. Some people claim no clear pronoun preference, like participant Milo,

who said “my pronouns are he/they, interchangeably. I literally don’t care which one you use, and it doesn’t matter if you fluctuate between the two, either, because they’re both correct.” Others express a preference, while simultaneously affirming that they aren’t *averse* to other pronouns. Kyrie (21, they/she), for instance, explained that “they/them gives me gender euphoria, but other pronouns don’t cause dysphoria.” Still others -- including gender-fluid or bigender people -- might alternate back and forth between pronoun sets from one social context to another, or as their moods and feelings change. Participant Cameron (22, they/them), for instance, explained that while the pronoun ‘she’ makes them feel dysphoric in most situations, they find this pronoun tolerable (or even preferable) when out in public with their partner:

My partner Kay is non-binary, and also was assigned female at birth, and identifies more as agender...our relationship makes me feel more female, or more female-aligned. So I refer to that relationship amorphously as lesbian, even though we’re both kind of, like, not women. But that relationship makes us both feel like we’re in more of that kind of gender space...I don’t really care [then] if people perceive my gender as being, like -- if people are like, ‘ohh, Cam is a girl.’ I don’t care, as long as they consider me, like, a queer-looking girl...

Finally, there’s a cohort of TNB+ people who deploy auxiliary pronouns out of fear that the pronouns they *most* prefer won’t be respected or taken seriously. Adding in additional pronoun sets can make using affirming language feel more accessible to audiences -- for instance, skeptical parents -- that would otherwise resist using a person’s pronouns of choice. Participant Avery (22, they/them), for instance, whose co-workers had seemed stymied by requests to use ‘they/them’ pronouns, found that utilizing auxiliary pronouns at work reduced the frequency with which they were misgendered (i.e., called ‘she’):

I’m usually going by ‘they’ or ‘he.’ Uh, I prefer ‘they,’ but for the whole purpose of, like -- I don’t feel like explaining my identity to people who, like, aren’t there yet? [So] ‘he’ is

fine...[I work for] a security company, and lots of the people that work there are very conservative...now that I've decided that, like, 'they' or 'he' [is okay], nobody misgenders me.

However, as other participants observed, using auxiliary pronouns can also function as something of a double-edged sword. Outside observers might also interpret the use of multiple pronoun sets as evidence of identity instability, or as a signal that the person using auxiliary pronouns is insufficiently attached to their identity as trans. Participant Rigby (23, he/they), who had previously used they/them and he/him pronouns interchangeably, explained that he had elected to drop his auxiliary pronoun because it seemed "too confusing" for the cisgender people in his social circle, leading to *more* misgendering rather than less:

I have been pretty deliberately dumbing it down for cis people: 'I'm a man.' Like -- I feel like giving people, um, something that's *not* 'a man,' but is *approximating* a man, and [saying] 'you can call me 'he' or 'they,'" is giving them a license to call me 'she.' Like, I have to make it really easy for them. So, that has changed in the past year...like, 'I'm making this really easy. You have to actually *do it* now. You can't say it's because you don't understand my pronouns, 'cause you do.'

Finally, there are some people -- roughly 4% of LGBTQ people between the ages of 13 and 24 (Trevor Project 2020a) -- that utilize *neopronouns*. Neopronouns are pronouns *other* than the masculine pronouns he/him, the feminine pronouns she/hers, or the singular 'they.' Some sets of neopronouns are designed to mimic (visually or acoustically) existing pronoun sets -- for instance, the "Spivak" pronouns 'ey/em/eirs' (Spivak 1986), or the pronouns 'ze/hir/hirs.' Other neopronouns bear no resemblance whatsoever to existing pronoun sets, and may instead be yoked conceptually to particular identity groups, descriptive characteristics unrelated to gender, or even to objects (for instance, the pronoun sets 'star/starsel' and 'bun/bunsel' -- see Marcus 2021). While any person -- cis or trans -- can adopt neopronouns, and while people may choose to adopt

neopronouns for a number of reasons, many take on neopronouns in an effort to challenge the gender order, or to distance themselves from heteropatriarchal and cissexist expectations. For instance, as Cosmo (25, it/they) explained:

My pronouns are it/its/itself...[and I've gotten a] tidal wave of hate, because it's been, like, 'well, your pronouns are transphobic.' 'You're objectifying yourself.' 'You're making everyone else look bad.' 'You know that's a slur, right?' And it's, like, 'no' -- it's reclamation, and it's mine...I clicked with 'it' pronouns, because they are the furthest removed from gender. There is -- there's no possible way to glean an assumption from, from 'it.' And especially with, uh, non-binary expectations now, most people think non-binary means 'an androgynous AFAB person,' so even using just 'they/them' gets assumptions that, you know, you're female. Um, but -- 'it' just feels neutral. It feels 'me.' It feels like I can distance myself from expectations and roles, and everything to do with the binary that I just don't click with.

Gender Composition of the Sample

As should now be apparent, breaking down the gender composition of this sample depends on the gender categories included in the analysis, and on where the boundaries are drawn between them. To more effectively communicate the full diversity of the sample, **Table 2** -- presented below -- displays the gender breakdown of this sample in multiple ways.

Transmasculine people in this sample were more than twice as likely to self-describe as non-binary or genderqueer than were transfeminine people (53.3% of transmasculine participants, compared to 25% of transfeminine participants). While Shrier (2020) credits this discrepancy to young AFAB people's desire to "flee from womanhood," it is more likely that this variation stems from gender stereotyping and from the differential gender accountability processes in place for men and women. It is generally considered more socially acceptable for AFAB people to present in a masculine way than it is for AMAB people to present in a feminine way. While "tomboys" and other gender non-conforming "girls" are culturally celebrated (at least to a point), "sissies" and

feminine “boys” are typically scapegoated and abused (e.g., Meadow 2018; Pascoe 2011; Kane 2006). As a consequence, AMAB people may be less inclined to embrace a non-binary or gender-fluid identity label than some AFAB people, or might feel compelled to adopt a more rigid gender presentation in order to be taken seriously (as either a trans woman, *or* as a cis man).

Table 2: Understanding Sample Gender Composition

	Binary-Aligned Trans Men	Trans Men/ Transmasculine People That Also Identify as Non-Binary	Non-Binary People That Do NOT Identify As Men or Women	Trans Women/ Transfeminine People That Also Identify as Non-Binary	Binary-Aligned Trans Women
Proportion of Sample	15.2% (n=7)	17.4% (n=8)	41.3% (n=19)	6.5% (n=3)	19.6% (n=9)
	Trans Men and Transmasculine People (Regardless of Non-Binary Identification)		Non-Binary People That Do NOT Identify As Men or Women	Trans Women and Transfeminine People (Regardless of Non-Binary Identification)	
Proportion of Sample	32.6% (n=15)		41.3% (n=19)	26.1% (n=12)	
	Binary-Aligned Trans Men	People That Identify as Non-Binary (in ANY Capacity)		Binary-Aligned Trans Women	
Proportion of Sample	15.2% (n=7)	65.2% (n=30)		19.6% (n=9)	

Sexual Attraction, Sexual Behavior, and Sexual Identities

Conceptual slippage between queer and trans identities -- for example, framing trans identity as a kind of “sexuality” -- is an ongoing source of frustration for many trans and non-binary people. The symbolic imbrication of queer and trans people via the acronym “LGBTQ+,” for instance, has served a strategic purpose, helping sexual minorities and gender minorities to unite in the pursuit of shared civil rights protections; it has also, however, served as an ongoing source of confusion regarding the relationship between trans identity and sexual orientation

(particularly among members of the (cisgender) public, who may have had minimal exposure to trans people). This section is meant to explain where this imbrication stems from, and to explore how the participants in this sample made sense of the intersections between their own gender and sexual identities.

Trans and Non-Binary People and Sexual Identity

Early on in his interview, when I asked participant Rigby (23, he/they) whether any of the other trans and non-binary people he knew identified as queer, he laughed aloud: “Every trans person I know is bi, pan, queer -- maybe gay. There might be a gay in there. But I don’t actually know any straight trans people.” While heterosexual trans and non-binary people assuredly exist, extant demographics would suggest that they are comparatively few in number (James et al 2016; Grant et al 2011). The figure below -- compiled from the findings of the 2010 National Transgender Discrimination Survey -- approximates the demographics of this population with respect to sexual identity.

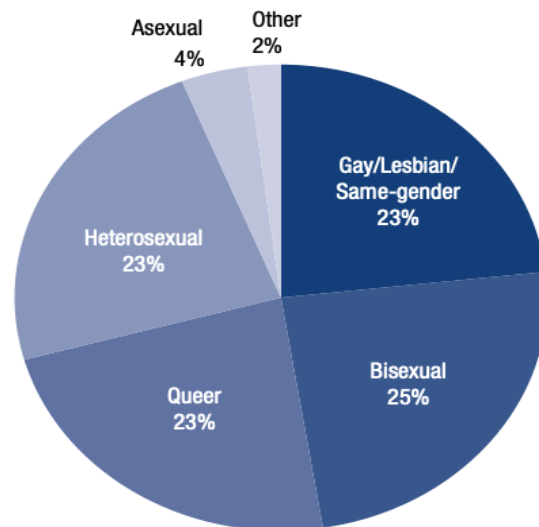


Figure 3.2: Findings from the 2010 National Transgender Discrimination Survey (Grant et al 2011) reveal the primary sexual identity labels claimed by a nationally-representative sample of transgender and non-binary people living in the U.S.¹⁷

¹⁷ It should be noted that, while respondents to this survey were restricted to a *single* sexual identity selection, many trans and non-binary people claim *multiple* labels in this domain (for example, identifying both as “bisexual” *and* as “queer”). In addition,

Virtually every participant in this sample (97.8%) described themselves as LGBTQ. In itself, this finding is unsurprising, due to a constellation of closely-related factors. For one, coming out as trans has significant potential to disrupt a person’s existing sexual and romantic relationships (if any). Many relationships don’t survive this transition, with some 45% of long-term relationships ending upon a partner’s disclosure of their identity (Grant et al 2011). In cases where these relationships *do* survive, reconfiguration and re-definition are often required. Trans or non-binary people who were previously involved in what looked like a “heterosexual” relationship may re-define themselves as bisexual, lesbian, or gay. The sexual identity of existing partners can further complicate the picture. For instance, Pfeffer (2014) has found that the (cis) female partners of trans men are often frustrated by others’ “misrecognition” of them as heterosexual, when in fact they identify (or have identified previously) as bisexual, lesbian, or queer. As one of her participants described, “I thought of myself as a dyke, and then now I’m with someone who identifies as a man, and I’m thinking -- how do I identify now?” (Pfeffer 2014, p. 19). Another noted that “all these people [in my life] would go, ‘oh -- what does that make you now?’” (Pfeffer 2014, p. 19). In this sense, embarking upon a relationship with a TNB+ person (or having an existing partner come out) can be a complex process, often requiring *both* parties to re-negotiate or re-frame their sexual identity.

While sexual identities are often positioned at the *individual* level of analysis -- that is, conceptualized as a factor that inheres within *individuals* themselves, as a product of their biology or psyche -- sociologists understand that sexual identities are themselves *structural* and *historical* products, given form by social systems that transcend individuals themselves (Rubin 1975;

asexuality -- while treated here as an independent sexual identity label -- overlaps significantly with other descriptors used to characterize “sexual” orientation, owing to the reality that many asexual people *do* experience *romantic* attraction, and are interested in forming relationships. For this reason, many asexual people label themselves concurrently as lesbian, gay, heterosexual, bisexual, or queer (Carroll 2021).

Foucault 1978; Seidman 2003; Green 2008). In this sense, *structural* factors -- for instance, the ongoing influence of heteropatriarchy, cissexism, and heterosexism -- can also serve to shape how TNB+ make sense of their sexual identities (for better and for worse). Ramona (20, they/he), for instance, described how the dynamic of “compulsory heterosexuality” -- the assertion that within the social context of heteropatriarchy, women (in every culture) are compelled to express an innate preference for romantic and erotic relationships with men, leading to the devaluation of intimate connections between women (Rich 1997) -- had inhibited both their own understanding of self (as a non-binary lesbian) and their partner Tiffany’s (as a lesbian trans woman):

My girlfriend Tiffany, for the longest time, thought that because she liked women -- and *only* liked women, and [other] non-men -- that she couldn't *be* a woman. She couldn't transition, because if you're a woman, you *have* to like men. And that -- that kept her in the dark for a really long time, about her own gender. [And] for me, compulsory heterosexuality was actually what started me, like, thinking about [my] sexuality...[well, it] started with sexuality, but then, as I was able to unpack it more and more over the years, it has also become inherently tied into how I experience my gender, and how all of that is kind of intertwined and entangled, in my own sense of self...like, it's the experience of only being able to visualize attraction to women through a man's eyes, which can be dysphoric, if you're a trans woman or a transfeminine person. And [it's] uncomfortable if you are any -- *any* Sapphic, really! Because that's the way that you're trained to see gender.

Moreover, many trans and non-binary people experience a change in their sexual identity or sense of sexual attraction after coming out -- even in the absence of intimate relationships (Auer et al 2014; Katz-Wise et al 2015; Meier et al 2013). Again, there can be many reasons for this change. Some who access medical transition -- in particular, those who take hormones -- find that their sexual desires shift over time, both in terms of the *intensity* of their desires and in terms of sexual object choice (Meier et al 2013). Others find that the comfort they experience in their new identity or their new presentation makes them more open to the possibility of exploring their sexuality than they may have been prior to coming out (Auer et al 2014; Vrangalova 2018). This

shift can be precipitated not only by evolving *sexual* interest, but also by an evolving awareness of the relationship *forms* that a person finds most attractive. For example, Pfeffer's (2017) recent work on the (cis) women partners of trans men argues that while we've tended to frame "sexual orientation" as an orientation towards a particular type of sexual *object*, sexual identity is also about attunement to a particular mode of *being* -- in the world, and in relationships. For many, sexual identity is about defining what sexuality *means* for participants' identities (and for the identities of their partners). Pfeffer argues that the relationality of gender and attraction -- that is, the fact that sex, gender, and sexuality are co-constructed, bound inextricably together within the confines of the sex/gender/sexuality system (Westbrook 2016) -- create a set of conditions where "sexual objects" are themselves in flux: the experience of being attracted to cis women as a lesbian or bisexual woman is a fundamentally different experience from being attracted to cis women as a transgender man. Cis-het "sexual scripts" (Simon & Gagnon 2003) presume a stability to the sex/gender/sexuality system that trans and non-binary people challenge. Thus, for many TNB+ people and their partners, the question of defining "sexual identity" may hinge less upon attraction to "women" or "men" than it does upon attraction to the *social logics* of heterosexuality or queerness.

Even in cases where a person's sexual identity or sense of sexual attraction remain unchanged, a trans or non-binary person might choose to self-define as "queer" after coming out, simply out of a desire to affirm that their sexual identity (or the identity of their partners) can be "complicated." This may hold particularly true for non-binary and gender-fluid people, who generally find that their position outside of the gender binary displaces them from the heterosexual/homosexual binary, too. As non-binary participant Vinny (22, they/them) explained, "it doesn't matter who I like or who likes me -- it's all gay."

Things become even more complicated when we consider that “sexual orientation” is itself a multidimensional entity (Diamond 2008). Sexual attraction, sexual behavior, and sexual identity must all be considered in assessing a person’s “orientation,” and these three factors don’t always align or accord with one another. In addition, attraction and behavior *themselves* are multidimensional constructs, insofar as they can concern either *sexual* (erotic) desire *or* romantic desires. Some people, for instance, might experience erotic attraction to people of multiple genders while continuing to identify as gay or straight. The “political lesbians” (Ellis & Peel 2010; see also Rich 1997, Jeffreys 2003) of the 1970s and 1980s -- who claimed that identifying as lesbian was an inherently political act, “an assertion of refusal of the heteropatriarchal order and a commitment to women” (Wilkinson & Kitzinger 1994, p. 313) -- would fall into this category, as would the many men that solicit men as masturbatory or sexual partners on sites like Craigslist while continuing to define themselves as straight (Ward 2008). While bisexual, pansexual, and other plurisexual people -- that is, people that experience attraction to (or engage in sexual/romantic behavior with) people of more than one gender -- might unite in claiming “bisexual” or “pansexual” as a primary identity label, the ways in which they characterize their activity and desires might in fact be very different. For example, some bisexual people -- like participant Jayde (24, she/her) -- choose only to date women, or only to date men. They might experience *sexual* attraction toward people of some genders, but only *romantic* attraction to people of other genders (like participant Cassidy (18, she/her), who explained -- somewhat ruefully -- that she was primarily *physically* attracted to women, but only interested in forming relationships with men). Some are not interested in dating trans or non-binary people; others -- like Rigby (23, he/they) -- may *only* be interested in intimacy with other TNB+ people. In each of these cases, participants’ self-descriptions --- with respect to identity, behavior, *and* attractionality -- are being directed and

informed by *social* forces. Participant Sebastian (20, they/them), for example, framed their decision to self-describe as bisexual (as opposed to “queer”) as a political decision, borne out of the ongoing erasure of bisexual men:

I think right now, I want to identify as bi, because, like -- this sounds really fucked up, but, like, I don't think enough masculine people identify as bisexual?...I say this really spicy¹⁸ thing, but, like, if you're -- like, there's a difference between being a lesbian and a bisexual woman in the eyes of straight society, because bisexual women are still useful to heterosexual men, right? But if you're a bi man, you're a faggot -- like, that's just how it is...the only bi men I know right now are trans.

In the same vein, participant Vinny (22, they/them) explained that while they identified strongly with masculinity, their politics and their attachment to the queer community made it challenging to envision identifying as “straight.” This attachment ultimately led Vinny to claim the label “lesbian” as a primary identity, even though this term has traditionally been used to describe “women”:

I'm very comfortable being a non-binary lesbian. I love the *term* lesbian -- it fits right, and it sits nicely. I love the colors of the flag. I just love it. I like being gay...it's almost like I don't want to be straight, because I don't like boys. If I transitioned to a male and I still like girls, then I'm straight. That's boring.

Although sexual identities are often conceptualized as being more “fluid” or more subject to change than are gender identities, several participants acknowledged that their politics had similarly informed the labels they selected to describe their gender. As participant Jo (22, they/she) summarized, “I do think a lot of [identity claims-making] is political, and I don't think that's a bad

¹⁸ “Spicy” is Twitter/Tumblr slang, used to describe opinions/statements that are inflammatory or controversial (e.g., “Did you read so-and-so's spicy take on the Tumblr pornography ban?”).

thing...I think that the way that you present yourself *is* very political, even if you don't intend for it to be. Being trans is a political statement." Luca (18, he/him) explained that while he identified strongly with masculinity and conceptualized himself as a trans man, he made a point of describing himself as non-binary in public, in an effort to complicate people's perceptions of him (and, thus, to challenge gender norms):

I figured out I was trans masc, but I feel like I'm more somewhere along the lines of non-binary right now, because personally, I don't care about how I'm perceived. Well, I *do* care about how I'm perceived -- it's just -- it's more of, like, how *I* perceive me, as opposed to how *people* perceive me. Because I'm kind of disillusioned with the whole concept of gender. I don't want to sound trippy or anything like that -- it's just that the concept of gender is so, like, made by cis people that it's just kind of, like, 'you know what? I'm not going to ascribe to it.' So it's more of, like, a political non-binary-ism.

Some participants on the project adopted an even more constructionist perspective, asserting that their social and political experiences had played a direct role in shaping their *subjective* experience of gender (and not just the labels that they had adopted to describe it). Dov (23, they/them), for instance, remarked that they had once believed their internal experience of gender to mirror that of their gender-dysphoric (cis) partner. However, while Dov and their partner reported similar *feelings* about their bodies and their places in society, Dov noted that their *social* experiences had shaped their processing of those feelings in ways that ultimately led Dov to claim a very different label from their partner. They reflected that they, too, might have chosen a different label to describe their feelings, had they formed different relationships or been involved in different social spaces along the way:

[I was] reading people's writing on the Internet, and, like, encountering a new concept of, like, 'he/him lesbians,' which is just, like -- it sounded really conceptually dissonant, when I first heard about it. Like, 'so, you identify with man-ness enough to use the pronouns that we usually use for men, but you're a lesbian? Like, what's even going on?' And then,

reading further into people who had addressed their gender dysphoria by using different pronouns or transitioning, but still align themselves with lesbians and consider themselves lesbians -- like, that could have been me! And then, my partner's a dysphoric cisgender woman who's just, like, 'I experience gender dysphoria, but I exist in this world as a woman, and that's really important to me, and that's the team that I'm on.' And -- and so, just...conceptually, it's an option out there, somewhere, that I think could have been me...I also definitely think that if I didn't go to [my small, queer-friendly liberal arts college], maybe I never would have explored my gender in the way that I have now. I think that I was always going to be gender non-conforming, and that that's something that's essential to who I am as a person. But I don't think that being, like, a medically-transitioning trans person was predetermined, and was always going to happen to little-kid me, if I'd had different life experiences.

Dov's reflection also highlights another critical impact of the ongoing imbrication of sexuality and gender. As public understanding and acknowledgement of trans and non-binary people have continued to expand, this increased recognition has encouraged the deconstruction and extension of existing sexual identity categories, leading to the development of new identity labels (and to the expansion of old ones). While the extension of the category "lesbian" to include people that identify as men or masculine has been among the most controversial of these evolutions, the label "lesbian" has also expanded -- at least, in many spaces online -- to include plurisexual people of various kinds (for instance, bisexual or pansexual people), as well as non-binary people. *Resistance* to this expansion -- typically, stemming from old-guard radical feminist and lesbian separatist voices, wary that loosening boundaries around "the L word" will lead lesbians to "go extinct" (Stahl 2021; see also Stein 2010, Thorpe 2015, Cruz 2017) -- has also driven the creation of a *new* label: "Sapphic" (arguably, more inclusive than the label "lesbian," in that it is meant to encompass any person aligned with femininity (including trans women and both AMAB and AFAB non-binary people) interested in other feminine people -- see koalatygirl 2021). In almost exactly the same fashion, critiques of the label "bisexual" as reductionist and trans-exclusionary have given rise to a new, more "inclusive" label -- *pansexual* (Belous & Bauman

2017; Hayfield & Křížová 2021) -- which, in turn, has contributed to a re-definition and expansion of the label *bisexual*, with advocates of this label working to re-frame bisexuality as an attraction to both people of *one's own gender* and people of *other genders* (rather than as an attraction to people of one's own sex and to "the opposite" sex -- see Flanders et al 2017, Berg 2020). That the emergence of TNB+ people has provoked such massive, ground-up restructuring of the LGBTQ+ landscape attests to the myriad of ways in which gender and sexual identities are *co-constructed*, demonstrating that changes in our thinking regarding one dimension of the sex/gender/sexuality system (Westbrook 2016) often necessitate changes across the other dimensions, too.

While the language used to describe LGBTQ+ people is constantly evolving, not all TNB+ people are keen to adopt a string of different identity labels. The more specific the labels in question, the less likely other people -- particularly cis-het people -- are to recognize and understand them. For this reason, many TNB+ people tailor the language that they use to describe themselves based on their intended audience. Luca (18, he/him), for instance, reported that while he identified as both transmasculine and non-binary, he often truncated this description for strangers: "[Sometimes] I just say I'm a dude, because [it's] complicated. Cis people are barely figuring out that trans men exist." Avery (22, they/them) used the word 'queer' -- a term that can be used to encapsulate binary-defying experiences of both sexuality *and* gender -- as a catch-all to signify their status as 'outside' of prevailing sexual and gender norms, while still sparing them from spooling off a litany of labels to everyone they might encounter:

So, a lot of my ones are, like -- so -- so, trans, but, like, non-binary trans, so that's a new label. Uh, I've been waffling between 'demi' and 'ace,' and I'm pretty sure I'm ace. Uh, and I can add, probably, something on the aro[mantic] spectrum. So it -- you just keep compounding labels, and at some point, it's just like, 'I'm queer.' I don't need to explain it all to you...especially when you're, like...if I'm with a bunch of random conservative people, or, like, just people who aren't in the community, necessarily, and don't know all

of the different labels, uh, I don't feel the need to explain to, like, forty different people individually.

These descriptions suggest that TNB+ young people often tailor their descriptions of their identities to suit what they think observers -- and, in particular, cisgender observers -- are likely to recognize and understand. This, in turn, implies that much of the extant research on TNB+ people -- quantitative and qualitative alike -- may be failing to capture this population in its full complexity, missing or under-counting people that “simplify” their identities in order to evade misrecognition, or that gloss their identities to avoid being stereotyped as attention-seeking: an important finding for future scholarship in this domain.

TNB+ People and Ace-Spectrum Identities

Adding an additional layer of complexity to the identity/attraction/behavior landscape, there are many young people that experience minimal (or no) sexual or romantic attraction -- and this population is rapidly growing (Rothblum et al 2020; Carroll 2021; Prause & Graham 2007). A recent survey conducted by The Trevor Project (2020b) has found that some 10% of LGBTQ+ young people now describe themselves as asexual. Where “asexuality” was once a unified identity label, exclusively used to describe a totalizing absence of sexual interest or expression (Bogaert 2004), today's young people characterize asexuality as a *spectrum*, encompassing both people that are wholly sex-averse *and* people whose sexual desires are less salient/intense, more variable, or more context-dependent than those expressed by allosexual (non-asexual) people. The availability of new, semi-sexualized identity labels like “demisexual” and “gray-ace” has rendered ace-spectrum identities increasingly accessible, making “ace” a viable and culturally-significant identity label for those that relate to sex and sexuality in a variety of ways.

Asexuality is best understood as a type of *sexual identity* (Houdenrove et al 2015; Scherrer & Pfeffer 2017; Prause & Graham 2007). While prior research has tended to define asexuality as hinging upon either a lack of sexual desire or sexual attraction (e.g., Bogaert 2004) or an “absence of sexual behavior” (Scherrer 2008, p. 622), qualitative research with asexual people has since confirmed that both of these definitions are problematic: people that self-describe as asexual or demisexual may indeed experience sexual desire (whether these desires are *autosexual* in nature (e.g., focused on masturbation and self-pleasure), intermittent or context-specific, or driven by the desire to please others), and do participate in sexual behavior (both to fulfill social expectations (Brotto et al 2010; Dawson et al 2016), or out of genuine desire). In addition, it is important to note that those who are disinterested in sex are not necessarily disinterested in romantic relationships. For this reason, asexual people may describe themselves concurrently as heterosexual or heteroromantic, bisexual or biromantic, pansexual or panromantic, lesbian, or gay.

While some asexual or demisexual people might self-conceptualize as straight, adoption of these identity labels is disproportionately common among LGBTQ+ people (Trevor Project 2020b; Rothblum et al 2020; Ginoza & Miller 2014). Echoing Rigby’s remarks on the scarcity of heterosexual trans people, participant Sebastian (20, they/them) asserted that cis-het asexual people appear few and far between: “Personally, [I think] a-spec discourse¹⁹ is pretty inconsequential? Because, like, heterosexual asexual people -- like, I’ve never met one. I don’t think I ever will. Like, to me, it feels like a red herring.” Some have suggested that the over-representation of queer people among those with-ace spectrum identities may be a consequence of asexual people’s alienation from heterosexuality (Gupta 2019; MacNeela & Murphy 2015;

¹⁹ By “a-spec discourse,” Sebastian is referring to online debates about whether asexual people should be considered members of the LGBTQ+ community, or should be allowed to describe themselves as “queer.” In Sebastian’s eyes, the over-representation of LGBTQ+ people among those that claim ace-spectrum identities renders the question of whether “straight ace people” are infiltrating the queer community a non-issue.

Przybylo & Cooper 2014). Abstaining from sexual expression challenges gender expectations for both cis men *and* cis women. By rejecting sex, men lose their access to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995), reaffirming projections of themselves as impotent, weak, or inadequate as sexual “aggressors”; women, in turn, are enshrined as frigid, unwilling to appease men’s desires or to submit to their sexual needs (Fahs 2010). In addition, while being “turned on” by people of particular genders is one of the most (indeed, perhaps *the* most) central discerning factors used to characterize people as heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, or gay, those who are “turned off” by the thought of sexual expression with people of *any* gender often find that they are very capable of sustaining rich *non*-sexual -- i.e., platonic -- relationships with people of *any* gender. The rise of “queerplatonic” relationships, for instance -- same-gender relationships that are “more than” friendships, but which don’t involve sex -- has helped to motivate some asexual and demisexual young people to describe themselves as queer (Goerlich 2021).²⁰

Some scholars working in this domain have also speculated that a correlation may exist between asexuality, gender nonconformity, and identification as TNB+ (Trevor Project 2020b; Cuthbert 2019; Gupta 2019; Brotto et al 2010; Gazzola & Morrison 2012; Ginoza & Miller 2014). Of the 10% of LGBTQ+ young people identified as holding ace-spectrum identities by the Trevor Project, 41% described themselves as transgender or non-binary, and another 13% described themselves as “questioning” their gender (Trevor Project 2020b). There is some historical precedent for this linkage, owing to the historic imbrication of gender identity with sexual orientation (Ekins & King 2006, Meyerowitz 2002, Valentine 2007). As Gupta (2019) describes:

In the early years, many people seeking sexual reassignment surgeries (SRS) were required to present to doctors as asexual because, for example, if a trans woman revealed that she

²⁰ Of course, it is also important to note that not all participants in queerplatonic relationships necessarily identify as asexual, or claim ace-spectrum identities -- some allosexual people participate in these kinds of relationships, too.

felt sexual desire prior to transition, if this desire was for a man, her desire could be interpreted as homosexual, and if this desire was for a woman, it could be interpreted as reflecting comfort with her (pre-transition) ‘male’ body, both of which could be reasons to bar her from receiving SRS. In addition, if a person revealed an expectation that they would experience homosexual desire after transition, they also could be barred from receiving SRS. It was safest for people seeking SRS to describe themselves as somewhat asexual prior to and during transition, and to express the expectation that they would experience heterosexual desire post-transition. Thus, scholars have argued that many trans people were required by the medical field to adopt asexuality as a guise. (p. 1201-1202)

There may be additional factors undergirding this imbalance. Some have made (fairly unconvincing) recourse to biological factors, arguing that features like differential hormone exposure in utero may predispose some to both asexuality and gender variance (e.g., Bogaert 2012). Others, like Erickson-Schroth (2014), have noted that hormone replacement therapy (particularly estrogen-based therapies) can attenuate erotic desire in some trans people, leading to a loss of interest in sexual relationships. Still others have related this discrepancy to the liberation some asexual people may enjoy from the ongoing rat-race of the partner search and dating markets, arguing that that “sexual attractiveness standards govern gender presentations and behaviors, and that without the desire to attract a sexual partner, asexual people may have more freedom to explore their own genders” (Chasin 2011, p. 716). Similarly, Gupta (2019) suggests that “a large percentage of asexually-identified individuals feel less attached to those aspects of gender that are related to sexual scripts...[such that] asexually-identified women may be less attached to those aspects of femininity that involve working to make oneself physically attractive to men” (p. 1201). Cuthbert (2019), however, rejects both of these prevailing interpretations, framing this overlap instead as a product of the dynamic co-construction of gender and sexuality:

Explanations that posit gender diversity as arising from the (a)sexual development process, as related to asexuality’s liberatory potential, or as a strategy for managing psycho-cognitive dissonance do not adequately reflect the experiences of [asexual people].

Asexual-agender subjectivities instead emerged much more complexly through how participants made sense of concepts like gender and sexuality, and how these meanings were dynamically understood and experienced through the lived body. Crucially, these subjectivities also were situated, formed, and shaped in the broader sociostructural context of heteropatriarchy...whilst [my] participants had a keen awareness of the significance of gender in shaping the social world, including an awareness of how their own experiences were shaped by how others gendered them, around two-thirds of the asexual participants talked about how gender actually felt irrelevant to them on the most intimately subjective level...for more than half of [my] participants, this sense of the irrelevancy of gender had translated into an understanding of themselves as agender, gender-neutral, or genderless. Participants who described themselves using these terms also connected this to their asexuality. They spoke about how gender is essentially about sexuality, and because they had a lack of interest in sex or did not feel sexually attracted to others, gender (their own and others) became much less important to them.

Interestingly, the bulk of extant research into asexual identification among young people has centered the Internet as a locus of asexual organizing. The Internet is both a safer space to envision disclosing these kinds of identities, and a way to make asexual identity visible to others (when -- like many other queer and trans identities -- it might be overlooked or misinterpreted in analog contexts). Since this project centers social media use, it is unsurprising that asexual, demisexual, and other participants with ace-spectrum identities are well-represented in this sample. Social media platforms and online communities make fruitful terrain for exploring how gender identity, gender presentation, and sexual subjectivities -- including agender or asexual subjectivities (Cuthbert 2019) -- evolve *with* and *through* one another, providing us with unique tools to view the intersections between them.

Composition of the Sample with Respect to Sexual Identity

Of the 46 total participants on the project, only one -- pilot participant Ariel (23, she/her) - identified as heterosexual. 10 participants (20.8%) self-described as lesbian, and 3 (6.3%) self-

described as gay men. Two participants -- Rebecca (25, she/her) and Brynn (23, they/she) -- described themselves as “questioning.” The remaining 30 participants (66.7% of the sample) described themselves primarily as bisexual, pansexual, queer, or otherwise attracted to people of more than one gender. In addition, 14 participants on the project (30.4%) claimed ace-spectrum identities, with six describing themselves as asexual, six as demisexual, and two as “gray-ace.”

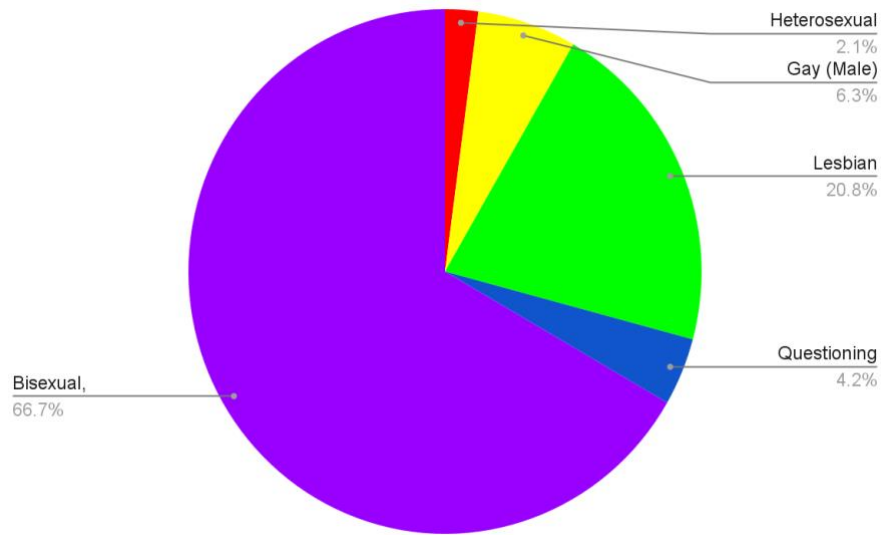


Figure 3.3: Primary Sexual Identity Labels Selected by Sample Participants

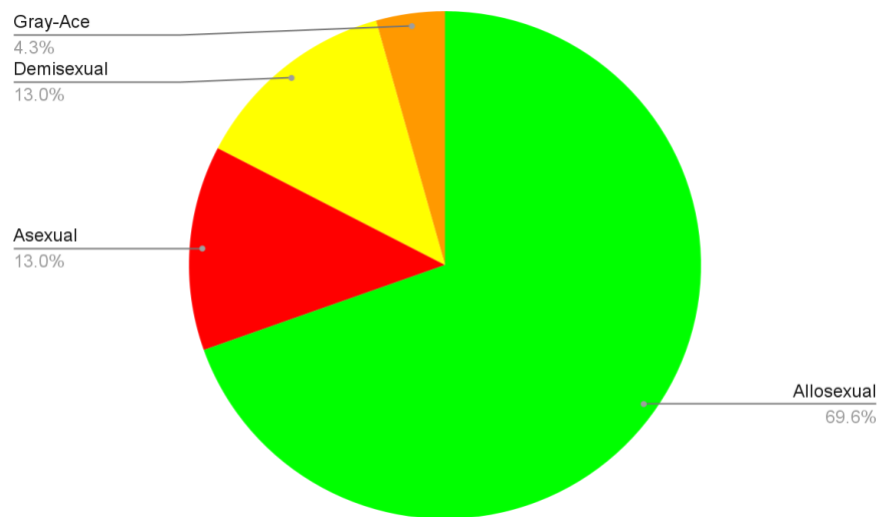


Figure 3.4: Ace-Spectrum Identification Among Project Participants

While an overview of the identity labels participants claimed is presented in Table 1, these descriptors have not always seemed adequate to capture the nuance and complexity of participants' experiences. In an effort to provide a fuller-spectrum accounting of participants' gender and sexual sense-making (and to the areas in which their gender and sexual identities intersect), I have also compiled a table of participants' own long-form descriptions of their identities (as indicated on the enrollment questionnaire), attached as **Appendix D**.

Educational Attainment

This is a disproportionately well-educated sample. Virtually all of the non-pilot²¹ participants enrolled -- 33 out of 36, or 91.7% -- reported at least *some* college experience at the time of their first interview session (whether at a four-year university, or at a community college). Seven (19.4%) had already completed a bachelor's degree at the time of their enrollment, and another nine (25%) were in the process of completing such a degree. Only three participants (8.3% of the sample) had no college experience at all.

There are a number of factors at play in shaping these findings. For one, the target age range for this project -- ages 18 to 25 -- aligns neatly with the prime age range for college attendance (ages 19-22), particularly at four-year universities. Some have also argued that those with postsecondary educational experience may be more likely to volunteer themselves for academic research. Schmitz and colleagues (2019) find that young people who have attended college have a richer general understanding of the academic enterprise, and may be more likely to participate in research as a result (either out of enthusiasm for the research endeavor itself, or because they appreciate the challenges of recruitment and hope to lend their support). They may

²¹ Pilot participants were not surveyed about their educational attainment.

have a deeper desire to contribute to knowledge production about LGBTQ communities, or have firmer faith in the belief of these contributions to promote widespread social benefit (Schmitz et al 2019).

It may also hold true that college students are more likely to participate in research conducted *online*, or where social media plays a critical role. College students are more likely to have consistent access to broadband or high-speed Internet than are non-students (Smith et al 2011), and are also more likely to use social media on a daily basis (Pew 2015; Auxier & Anderson 2021). Moreover, college students are disproportionately likely to come from financially secure backgrounds -- another predictor of consistent Internet access, both in the home and via mobile device (Braga et al 2017; Smith et al 2011).

In addition -- and while data on the subject remains limited -- LGBTQ people may be somewhat more likely than their cis-het counterparts to pursue higher education (Mollborn & Everett 2015; Watson & Russell 2014; Walsemann et al 2014). As Mollborn and Everett (2015) write, “sexual minorities may anticipate more *social* benefits to higher education than heterosexuals do. The social benefits highlighted here have to do with enabling self-selection away from discriminatory environments, which are a real threat to many adolescents and adults who identify as sexual minorities” (p. 4). LGBTQ people may find that attending university -- particularly when such attendance requires moving some distance from home -- makes it easier to envision coming out or dating, knowing that these activities can be explored in a context free of familial influence or observation.

Of course, the experiences of TNB+ college attendees may differ in important measures from those of TNB+ people that did not attend college. For instance, some research suggests that while LGBTQ+ college students may not be more likely than other cohorts of students to

experience same-gender attraction, they may indeed be more likely to *label* that attraction by claiming an LGBTQ+ identity (Mollborn & Everett 2015; Hatzenbuehler 2010). Exposure to others with diverse sexual or gender identities in college may also aid in the identity exploration process for TNB+ youth. More research is needed to fully elaborate the social experiences of those TNB+ social media users that have pursued no higher education.

Racial and Ethnic Composition

This is also a disproportionately *white* sample, despite intentional efforts to share the call for recruitment in online communities geared toward users of color. Of the 46 total participants in this sample, 36 people (78.3%) self-described as white. One participant identified themselves as Native American; the remaining nine described themselves as multiracial or mixed-race (with seven of these nine claiming whiteness as a *component* of their heritage).

This finding is somewhat surprising, given recent research suggesting that online communities make some of the most effective venues for the recruitment of people of color (and that TNB+ people of color may be disproportionately active online, even relative to other cohorts of trans youth -- see Stone et al 2020). Some of this discrepancy in recruitment can likely be attributed to ongoing racialized stereotypes about trans people (and non-binary people in particular) -- a theme that seemed to come up in interviews over and over again. Milo (21, he/they), for instance, remarked that “[it’s] like everyone sees non-binary people as AFAB, slim, androgynous, white dumb-asses, rather than the varied melting pot that the non-binary community is.” Cosmo (25, it/they) agreed that “the main expectation I see is, like, androgynous, thin, and white -- and it’s gross.” Participant Vinny (22, they/them) joined the chorus to concur, “the androgyny, the white[ness], the thin[ness] -- that’s a stereotype of non-binary for sure, one hundred

percent. That's what non-binary 'looks like'...they tend to be masc-leaning androgynous, and thin, and white. If I had to pick out a photo of a non-binary person, that would probably be the one that I would choose -- even though I myself am non-binary and do not look like that." Marcel (22, he/they) acknowledged that concordance with these stereotypes can both (A) increase the likelihood that one will be accurately recognized as non-binary, and (B) yield intra-community status benefits:

Well, I think, like -- like, the representation in media, and, like, therefore probably, like, the image in most people's mind of, of, like -- the typical non-binary person is, like, you know -- like, a thin, AFAB, white person. Which, you know -- I think I benefit from fitting inside that box...like, there's, like, a lot of invisibility and erasure of -- of, like, AMAB non-binary people....I try to, like, you know, use my voice so that I push back against that...I think, like, the same -- the same thing happens in systems of oppression that you find, like, throughout society. Uh, you see what the dominant narrative is.

Persistent stereotypes that frame the "idealized" trans or non-binary person as white may discourage people of color from claiming the label non-binary (or from spending time in online communities geared towards TNB+ people).²² If the stereotypes themselves aren't a sufficient deterrent, spending significant amounts of time in majority-white communities as a person of color is certainly draining enough on its own. Racism and racial discrimination remain pervasive problems in LGBTQ+ spaces. Some research suggests that LGBTQ+ POC may ultimately come to rely more heavily upon their racial/ethnic communities of origin for social support than upon LGBTQ+ communities (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2014; Ghabrial 2017); queer and trans POC may feel alienated from majority-white LGBTQ+ spaces, or choose to withdraw from these spaces to

²² The limited demographic data available on this issue does indeed suggest that white young people may be somewhat more likely to self-describe as non-binary, genderqueer, or gender-fluid than are TNB+ youth of color. Todd et al (2019), for example, find in their nationally representative sample of trans and non-binary youth that two-thirds (66.8%) of participants identified as white, while only a third (33.2%) identified as POC.

avoid exclusion and abuse (Stone et al 2020). Even in situations where overt harassment is absent, participants may be reluctant to invest the energy required to help (even well-meaning) others make sense of their experiences, finding that participation in majority-white communities drains and depletes them instead of invigorating them. For this reason, many TNB+ POC prefer to socialize primarily within communities that *center* people of color (Stone et al 2020). These communities may be closed or made “secret” (e.g., as some groups on Facebook are), in an effort to further protect the space and deter non-POC from joining. Participants who organize the bulk of their social media use around these kinds of closed communities may be largely inaccessible -- indeed, in the case of secret or unlisted groups, literally invisible -- to researchers that are not themselves people of color.

Qualitative methodologists have well-documented the effects of researcher positionality upon the recruitment process, particularly with respect to race. As such, it would be remiss not to note that my own status as white -- a status which (unlike my gender or sexual identities) is readily visible to anyone that happens to peruse my university’s website -- is another factor that may have served to deter would-be participants. People of color -- and cisgender people of color, included - - are often dubious of the research process itself, having suffered great harm at the hands of the academic enterprise (e.g., Freimuth et al 2001); they may be inherently skeptical of researchers’ intentions or aims, especially when the researcher themselves comes from a different cultural background. Forging long-term, visible community ties with people of color (Moore 2018) and intentionally building a diverse research team can help to remediate some of these concerns for would-be participants. While the nature of the dissertation process has rendered collaborative data collection impossible here, future research in this domain should enlist the support of (ideally, community-based) BIPOC partners across all levels of the research process (in designing the

instrumentation, gaining access to possible recruitment venues, conducting interviews, analyzing collected data, and in disseminating findings).

Social Media Use

Participants in this sample described themselves as heavy social media users. On average, my participants reported spending 6.5 hours per day using social media, with only four participants (11.1%) indicating that they spent an hour or less per day. 10 people (27.8%) indicated that they logged on for less than five hours per day (the average for LGBTQ+ youth determined by Palmer et al 2013); eight users (22.2%) reported spending between five and seven hours a day on social media, and 14 (38.9%) reported spending 8 hours or more. Seven participants claimed to have social media applications open for more than ten hours a day; three reported more than 15 hours.

These figures well exceed the averages set by the American Psychiatric Association for characterizing “problematic” Internet use (Restrepo et al 2020; Spada 2014). However, investigations of the sequelae of intensive Internet use among cisgender versus TNB+ youth have suggested that this heavy usage may be *less* “problematic” for young people that are significantly socially marginalized (or, at least, problematic in *different* ways). For example, Allen and colleagues (2021) find in a recent (and nationally representative) survey of TNB+ youth that higher levels of internet use predicted higher self-reported well-being, improved self-esteem, and more positive body image -- the inverse of patterns found in examinations of problematic Internet use among cisgender youth. More research -- in particular, research emphasizing the experiences of non-binary and genderqueer young people -- is needed to understand these patterns.

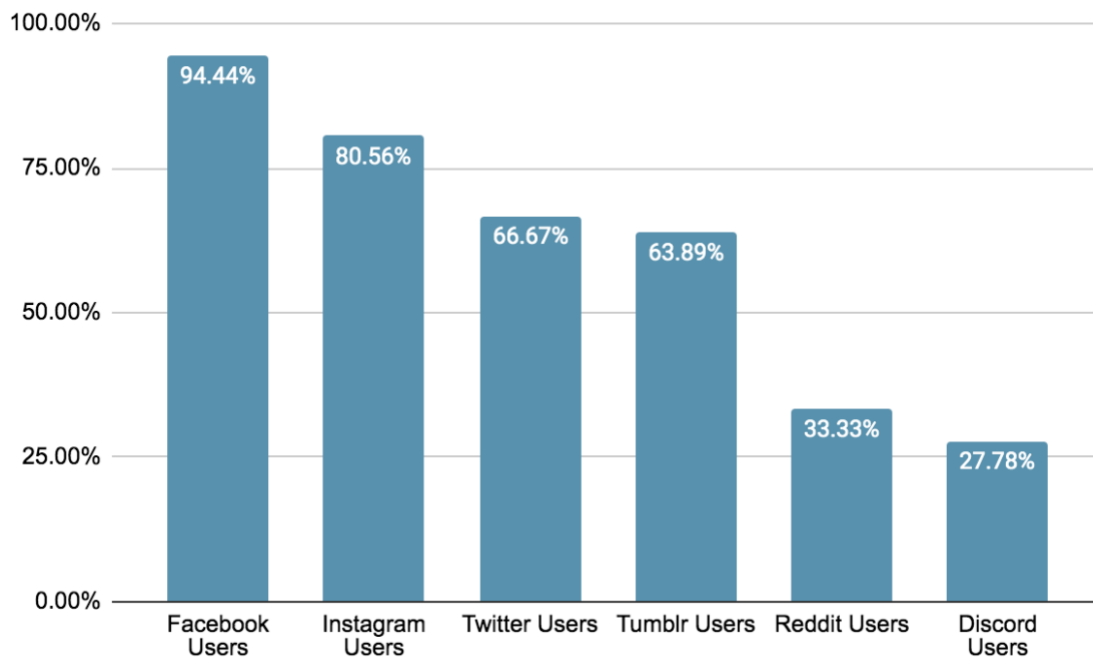


Figure 3.5: Social Media Platform Use Among Non-Pilot²³ Participants

Despite my participants’ repeated references to claims that “Facebook is dead” (Marcel, 22, he/they), that Facebook is a space for “conservative grandmas” (Rigby, 23, he/they), and that Facebook is “a wasteland where nobody goes” (Avery, 22, they/them), Facebook was by far the most commonly utilized platform in this sample, with 94.4% of participants claiming an active Facebook account. Four out of five were active on Instagram, two-thirds used Twitter, and roughly the same proportion had at least one Tumblr account. Users also claimed active profiles across a variety of platforms that were *not* incorporated into the Qualtrics survey. Of these, the most common platform referenced was Discord (not necessarily a “social media” platform -- at least, in the classic sense -- but a group messaging and voice chat platform, where users’ discussions persist

²³ As non-pilot participants were not monitored on social media and were not asked systematically about their social media use, their platform participation is not captured here.

over time). Other popular platforms included Snapchat (a photo/video sharing application where content deletes itself (unless screen-shot or saved) after a particular interval of time), TikTok (an application where users share and comment upon short video clips), and DeviantArt (a platform for sharing digital artwork -- particularly, fan art of popular TV shows, comics, or video games).

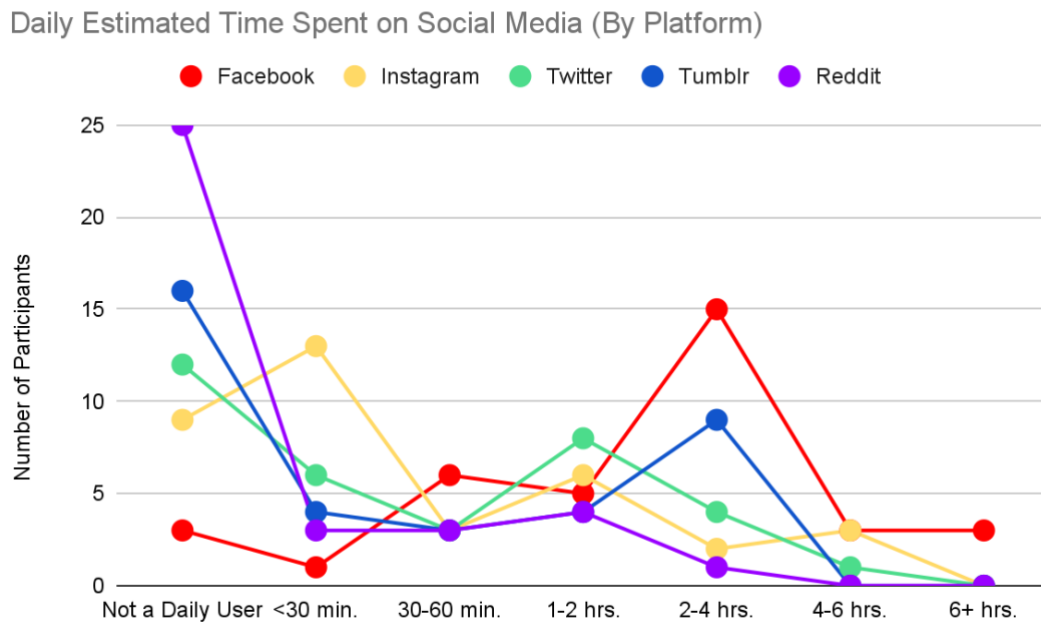


Figure 3.6: The chart above depicts the average length of time (per day) that participants estimated spending on each of the five most popular platforms discussed in these interviews.

Of the five most commonly used platforms discussed above, participants also reported spending the most *time* on Facebook, with 58% indicating that they spent at least two hours on Facebook per day. Facebook was also the only platform on which any participants reported spending more than *six* hours a day (e.g., for work), with 8.3% of participants indicating such usage. While nearly the same number of participants in this sample used Instagram as used Facebook, participants spent significantly less time on Instagram per day, with a third of users (36.1%) reporting that they logged on for less than 30 minutes per day. Modal Twitter usage was

reported as 1-2 hours per day. While markedly fewer participants used Tumblr than used Facebook or Instagram, those that *did* use Tumblr indicated themselves to be relatively heavy users, with the most commonly reported daily investment being two to four hours (twice as much time engaged as the Twitter users, and second only to Facebook in terms of the number of participants spending two hours a day or more online). Finally, Reddit — the least popular focal platform overall — also commanded the least daily attention, with only one participant indicating usage of more than two hours (and with 25 participants — more than two-thirds — indicating that they were not daily users of Reddit at all).

While my participants and I have much in common, the age gap between us -- though small -- meant that I failed to inquire in detail about many of the platforms my participants favored most (whether because they were just ascending to popularity, like TikTok, or because I wasn't familiar enough with them to ask appropriate questions, as in the case of Discord). My relative disconnect from these spaces made it difficult to get a sense of how these platforms are being utilized, and how they augment the broader landscape of my participants' social media use. Future research should be sure to incorporate these and other platforms rising to prominence among younger users (e.g., teens and pre-teens), and should explore how community participation on these platforms differs from participation on more established platforms (like the ones described here).

Disability and Mental Health

Finally, it is important to consider the role of disability and mental health status in shaping participants' experiences (both online, and of their identities more generally). In this sample, fully three-quarters of all non-pilot participants (75%) described themselves as having at least one disability or pre-existing mental health diagnosis (not including diagnoses of gender dysphoria).

Two-thirds of participants (67%) had been previously diagnosed with depression, an anxiety disorder, or both. A quarter of participants claimed autism spectrum disorders (either externally validated, or self-diagnosed). 22.2% had been diagnosed with PTSD or CPTSD. Six participants (16.7%) disclosed an eating disorder (either present/current, or previous). Since participants were not surveyed about their mental health or asked about existing mental health diagnoses directly, these statistics capture only health-related claims that participants offered spontaneously in the interview setting; it is likely that the actual prevalence of such diagnoses in the sample is somewhat higher, as the stigmatized nature of these diagnoses can inhibit some from disclosing (particularly to strangers).

While these figures are striking, they are not wholly surprising. For one thing, the experience of gender dysphoria itself is generally an unhappy one, likely to produce feelings of depression, isolation, and anxiety. As such, diagnoses of depression, generalized anxiety, and social anxiety are highly comorbid with diagnoses of gender dysphoria (Reisner et al 2016; Hanna et al 2019; Budge et al 2013; Borgogna et al 2019; Connolly et al 2016).²⁴ Most recent reports from the National Center for Transgender Equality conclude that 40% of transgender and non-binary people have attempted suicide at some point in their lives -- nearly ten times the figure for the general population (James et al 2016). While some people experience alleviation of their depression and anxiety along with transition, others find that transition introduces *new* challenges into their lives (e.g., loss of family; the end of intimate relationships; institutional

²⁴ More research is needed to understand how identification as non-binary (vs. identification as a binary trans man or trans woman) relates to participant mental health. Reisner and Hughto (2019), for instance, have recently concluded from a statewide sample of TNB+ young people in Massachusetts that non-binary participants report comparatively *lower* levels of depression and anxiety than did binary-aligned participants, and were also significantly less likely to have received mental health treatment or to have received clinical diagnoses of anxiety/depression. It is possible that identification as non-binary -- for example, non-binary participants' lower self-reported levels of gender dysphoria, or the emphasis these participants place on celebrating *euphoric* experiences -- may play a role in mediating or attenuating these mental health effects.

microaggressions; public harassment) that can cause depression and anxiety to persist (Budge et al 2013). Eating disorders -- highly comorbid with all forms of body dysmorphia, including gender-specific distress -- are disproportionately common among trans and non-binary people, AMAB and AFAB alike (Kamody et al 2020; Obarzanek & Munyan 2020; Diemer et al 2015; Avila et al 2019; Coelho et al 2019). It is unsurprising to see these patterns reflected here.

While additional research is needed, some have also speculated about the possibility of a relationship between TNB+ identity and autism spectrum disorders (Murphy et al 2020; Strang et al 2018; de Vries et al 2010). At present, the mechanisms at work in mediating such a relationship are not well understood; the limited research available (both biomedical and sociological) to date has generated findings that are inconsistent. For example, while some have proposed (concordant with the “Extreme Male Brain” theory of autism -- see Baron-Cohen & Hammer 1997) that AFAB children and teens with autism may find it challenging to relate socially to neurotypical cisgender women and girls, thus motivating them to “gravitate” towards masculine circles (Dewinter et al 2017; Jones et al 2012), others have suggested that the *opposite* pattern exists, with AMAB autistic children that struggle in male peer groups being drawn to “gentler,” more compassionate cohorts of women and girls (de Vries et al 2010). Moreover -- and as should go without saying -- forming cross-gender friendships should by no means be framed as synonymous with claiming trans identity; people with autism may be drawn to gender-atypical interests or peer groups for any number of reasons, many of which have little or nothing to do with gender identity. As yet, scholars have been unable to reach a consensus even on the proposed *directionality* of this relationship -- that is, whether autistic young people are more likely to experience gender dysphoria, or whether gender dysphoric and transgender young people are more likely to display autistic traits (Murphy et al 2020). However, despite our limited understanding of this relationship (and despite the

potential pitfalls -- ethical and social -- of working to define such a relationship empirically), the prevalence of autism spectrum disorders among participants in this sample suggests that additional research is merited: if not to determine the *etiology* of this connection, then at least to enhance our understanding of how autistic and TNB+ people are making sense of this relationship “on the ground.”

The prevalence of disability and mental health concerns within this sample may also be an artifact of recruiting online. The Web serves as a sanctuary for people that are socially marginalized -- both TNB+ people, and people that are isolated for many other reasons. Transgender young people experiencing depression, anxiety, or social isolation may spend more of their time socializing online or more time browsing social media than do trans youth with no mental health concerns. This finding holds important methodological implications, in that it suggests that those who are most active online may also be those most *vulnerable* to the various mental health sequelae of cyberbullying, Internet-driven social isolation, and intra-community harassment -- all issues that will be revisited in the chapters ahead.

CHAPTER 4: ON BEING “TRANS ENOUGH”: AUTHENTICATING TRANS IDENTITY NARRATIVES

In 2014, TIME magazine released a feature article headlined “The Transgender Tipping Point” (Steinmetz 2014). Within, Laverne Cox, an out trans woman and the cover model profiled in the piece, argued that increasing public awareness of what it means to be transgender has made it easier than ever before for gender-nonconforming Americans to claim a trans identity label. “We are in a place now where more and more trans people want to come forward and say ‘This is who I am,’” Cox tells Time. “More of us are living [and] pursuing our dreams visibly.”

Cox is right — trans identities *are* becoming more visible, and the question of what it *means* to be visibly trans is changing in kind. Over the past several decades, transgender has emerged as a politically and interpersonally salient category of identity, distinct from -- although dependent upon -- existing cultural categories used to organize gender. Some trans individuals have embraced gender fluidity as an idealized personal and political ethos (Davis 2008), rejecting binary identity categories and framing “queer” identity play as transgressive and transformative. However, as some scholars have suggested (Namaste 2010), this emphasis on the transformative possibilities of gender identity play has overshadowed the regulatory threat imposed by those same categories: namely, the fact that gender attribution continues to play a fundamental role in attaining cultural intelligibility. When others are unable to determine our gender, we cannot be “recognized” by them: in essence, we lose our personhood.

To date, gender scholars have largely failed to examine how trans and gender-variant individuals reconcile these competing tensions: how they balance their efforts to destabilize gender categories against social imperatives that demand consistency and cohesion in gender performance. Those advocating for narrative inconsistency find themselves in a tenuous position, recognizing that they need some measure of narrative consistency to convey their identities to others and have them taken seriously. As a consequence, while some are quick to praise the disruption of binary gender categories, their accounts often suggest a greater attachment to those categories than this disparagement might otherwise predict (Davis 2008; Namaste 2010). Understanding that inconsistent stories of self-discovery are likely to draw criticism, many go to great lengths to fortify their identity claims, conducting exhaustive searches for proof of their gender variance. Those who believe that they are most likely to be misrecognized by others—in this case, non-binary individuals — are among the most motivated to develop accounts that mirror the dominant narrative of trans experience. Yet, the same evidence that might be presented to affirm one’s trans identity — for example, evidence of gender-atypical behaviors or preferences in childhood — serves the dual purpose of reaffirming one’s identity as masculine or feminine, even when respondents might wish to problematize this distinction. Thus, and somewhat ironically, those persons with the greatest investment in subverting or upending the gender order are perhaps most likely to produce experiential accounts that reaffirm it. In turn, those who have conclusively “proven” their trans status (e.g., by accessing medical transition) gain a degree of freedom to push back on these stereotypes, less concerned about invalidation by others.

This chapter interrogates these challenges in context by examining how trans-identified respondents approach the process of composing (and revising) accounts of their gender experience. I show how the threat of identity challenge influences the construction of these accounts,

encouraging respondents with “messy” stories to balance efforts to center fluidity against the need to maintain social intelligibility. I find that in order to claim public identities as trans, non-binary respondents are often motivated to present accounts that closely reflect prevailing understandings of trans experience (e.g., the “born in the wrong body” narrative), even when these accounts fail to capture the nuance of their experiences. In turn, those who have already had their identities validated by others are more likely to present ambiguous accounts that center fluidity. The strategies that respondents leverage in composing their stories shape the possibility of longer-term change to the gender order. While non-binary individuals have been centered as the arbiters of gender’s undoing, the social and institutional constraints that shape gender accountability make it socially risky for many non-binary people to center gender deconstruction in their own identity narratives. This suggests that binary-identified respondents may be more strategically positioned to work towards this undoing than their non-binary counterparts.

Gender as an Interactional Accomplishment

As West and Zimmerman (1987) have argued, the constellation of behaviors and characteristics that make up gender are not intrinsic to the body. Instead, gender is a negotiated social achievement, which we constantly (if not necessarily consciously) work to defend. As we engage with others, attempts are made to determine our gender, interpreted through the deployment of signifiers coded as masculine or feminine — a process known as “gender attribution” (Kessler and McKenna 1978). In turn, we reciprocate this process, attributing gender to others by determining the category to which they appear to belong. We make determinations about gender by imputing sex category: as we observe others’ secondary sex characteristics, we pass them through a mental filter that allows us to interpret some signifiers as male (e.g., facial hair) and others as female (e.g., the presence of breasts). Curiously, in addition to helping us to see

differences between the sexes, this cognitive filter also encourages us to minimize or overlook traits that the sexes may hold in common (e.g., the presence of body hair): an effect that serves to exaggerate the magnitude of these visible sex and gender differences (Friedman 2014).

The “doing gender” framework presents gender as an attribute that can never be truly achieved, but only re-asserted as we move into new encounters. As a consequence, some have suggested that this framework advances new possibilities for understanding how the gendered order might be effectively subverted or transformed. For example, Deutsch (2007) argued that the greatest singular contribution of the “doing gender” approach to sociology has been its affirmation that if gender can be “done,” it can also be “undone”: the gendered hierarchies that undergird our social institutions can be dismantled, and the interactions that shape and support those hierarchies can be re-directed.

As gender-variant people cannot anticipate how they will be “read” by others, many engage with gender deliberately and self-consciously, tailoring their presentation in ways that will enable them to be seen as they desire. As Kessler and McKenna (2000; see also 1978) elaborate in their germinal work on the social construction of gender, “Transsexuals [sic] take their own gender for granted, but they cannot assume that others will. . . [they] must manage themselves as male or female.” It is this self-conscious apprehension of gender performance that has made the study of trans-identified people so fruitful for gender scholars. Some have contended that trans individuals may be uniquely positioned to work towards the undoing of gender, as their presence throws the taken-for-granted congruence between presumed sex category and gender expression into question. For example, in her study of workplace transition experiences, Connell (2010) argued that because trans people complicate the question of what it means to “do gender,” they undermine the social significance of the gender binary simply by asserting their own existence. In a similar

vein, Darwin (2017) has argued that because non-binary expressions of gender resist stable definitions, the potential for these identities to aid in transforming the gendered order may be immense — assuming, of course, that these challenges to the system are recognized and affirmed by others.

Yet, often, that same need for recognition thwarts the radical potential of these interventions. Empirical studies leveraging the “doing gender” framework have largely emphasized the foreclosure of change, asking how the gender order has remained so persistent over time. Part of this persistence stems from gender’s ubiquity—the pervasiveness with which it infiltrates our interactions, anchoring the institutions on which we depend (Ridgeway 2011; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Another insidious dimension emerges from our need to remain accountable to gender—to present a gendered self that others can recognize. When we engage others, we enter into a shared understanding of the situation at hand, and we are expected to act in accordance with that understanding (Goffman 1959). Just as we can’t escape the need to take a “line” in our interactions with others—for even if we reject the interaction, others will respond to that refusal and use it to establish a sense of what’s happening—it is impossible for us to opt out of gender performance. Even if we explicitly attempt to present ourselves as ambiguous, others may thwart us, assigning us automatically to whatever category seems “closest.” In attempting to present ourselves as androgynous, we may indeed lead others to question our gender; however, lacking a set of signifiers to connote identities that are explicitly “in-between,” the question drawn is less often “Is that a non-binary person?” than “Is that a boy or a girl?” This isn’t to suggest that individuals have no agency to innovate in their performances of gender—they certainly do—but, for these performances to impact lived reality, others must also be able to recognize them.

Accountability and Identity Formation

Finding that we are unable to classify someone's gender can be socially destabilizing, creating uncertainty about how to move the interaction forward. We have a responsibility as social actors to put on a performance that is intelligible to others (Butler 1990). At the same time, we also are accountable to ourselves to produce an "authentic" performance. Accountability operates not only through a logic of other-enforcement, wherein actors police one another's gender performance and sanction those who fail to perform as prescribed, but also through a logic of self-enforcement, wherein actors monitor their own behavior in anticipation of others' reactions (shuster 2017). Sociologist stef shuster, for example, has found that when some trans and gender-nonconforming individuals anticipate being misgendered or misrecognized by others, they will intentionally silence themselves as a method of self-protection or minimize their own reactions to help others "save face" (2017). Ambiguity motivates all actors to seek to restore order, even when this order means eliding nuance or compromising personal comfort.

These self-enforcement practices also have implications for emotional well-being. When we are unable to "do" gender in ways that others can recognize, others may challenge our performances. Consequently, we may come to question our own authenticity, and wonder whether we "really are" the people we've understood ourselves to be. As we construct continuous and socially credible accounts of our identities, this sense of continuity reinforces our confidence that these expressions are emblematic of our "true" self (Ezzy 1998; Linde 1993). These perceptions of personal authenticity have a host of beneficial impacts. For example, in times of personal transformation, being able to generate an internally consistent account of self can help respondents feel that they have "made sense" of their experiences, leading to greater perceptions of agency and self-efficacy (Hammack 2008). Feelings of authenticity also yield positive mental health impacts,

including lower rates of depression and anxiety (Schrock, Holden, and Reid 2004) and higher self-esteem (Mason-Schrock 2006). Conversely, doubting one's own authenticity can have negative consequences for social status, self-confidence, and trust in one's relationships with others.

On Being “Trans Enough”

While consistency of presentation is critical to establishing any social identity, it represents a central source of anxiety for those who are transgender. Claiming a new public gender identity involves active negotiation, seeking validation from others to affirm that one's identity is authentic and “real.” To maintain their accountability to gender, trans people must present a story of selfhood that not only claims affiliation with their preferred gender category, but also dis-claims affiliation with the sex category assigned to them at birth. Identity formation processes “link” individuals into place within cultural scripts (Loseke 2007), affording them social intelligibility. If respondents present an account that seems inconsistent, they face misrecognition at best, and stigmatization, exclusion, or violence at worst.

In addition to being accountable to others in interaction, trans people are accountable to the institutions that shape their lives. The medical and legal establishments play profound roles in directing the access that trans individuals have to social recognition, as well as the access they have to legal and medical procedures (e.g., hormone replacement therapy [HRT]; legal name changes) meant to affirm their status as their identified gender (see Schilt and Westbrook 2014). One point of great concern for individuals seeking access to medical transition, regardless of gender identity, is the fact that an individual cannot simply claim to have been “born in the wrong body” and demand that others recognize them as such: “in order to become transsexual [sic], an individual must first be clinically authorized to be transsexual” (Yeadon-Lee 2009). This means

that in most states, to access hormone therapy and other medical interventions, trans-identified individuals must first secure a letter of confirmation from a qualified psychologist or physician diagnosing them with gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria is typically diagnosed through a series of life-history interviews, wherein the patient recounts their childhood experience of gender and explains how physical transition will benefit them. Thus, for persons seeking medical transition, narrative consistency becomes a paramount concern: these respondents face significant pressure to ensure that their stories meet the provider's expectations, as stories judged as unconvincing often yield denial of care.

For those who claim identities somewhere in the “messy middle”—identities that fall in between existing cultural categories, or that blur the boundaries between them—presenting identity narratives that appear consistent is uniquely challenging. Bisexual people, for instance, another group positioned in this “messy middle,” are often rendered invisible in their interactions with others, as casual observers may presume them to be heterosexual, gay, or lesbian (Diamond 2008). While the acknowledgement of an essential homosexuality paved the way for the social recognition of non-heterosexuals, this acknowledgement left bisexuals with no foundation upon which to construct an independent sexual identity. As Rust (1992) asserted in her study of lesbian and bisexual identity formation, “[To] establish a legitimate [bisexual] identity . . . must involve a redefinition of bisexuality as a holistic experience, rather than a hybrid homosexual- heterosexual experience—a redefinition that would destroy the dichotomous conception of sexuality” (383). The resistance of other actors to these efforts—in this case, lesbian women—may undermine efforts to affirm bisexuality as a free-standing category of identity.

Non-binary individuals face a similar problematic: as increasing social recognition of binary transgender identities has transformed our understanding of the gender system, affirming

that gender identity need not correlate directly with biological sex, these shifts have rendered fundamentally invisible those who fall outside of the binary (shuster 2017). While we have developed stable sets of cultural signifiers that can be used to “flag” binary gender identities, non-binary gender identities trouble these distinctions. Non-binary people may find their identities elided in interactions with others, who may categorize them on sight as men or women. In an important extension of Connell’s (2010) work, Pfeffer (2014) terms this process “misrecognition”—the misapprehension, deliberate or unintentional, of a person’s identity by others. Pfeffer observes that, rather than serving as an effect of the binary gender system, misrecognition in fact gives form to the gender binary, helping to perpetuate and diffuse it. To maintain an affiliation or secure some social gain, there are moments where individuals may intentionally attempt to orchestrate their own misrecognition (Pfeffer 2014). At other times, people may be inadvertently misrecognized, finding that their identities are literally “unthinkable” to others.

As I have described, this effort to claim visibility is as important for shaping self-understanding as it is for shaping social interaction. We often assume that if our own experience differs from that of our peers, it must by extension be less legitimate. Again, these concerns are heightened among those who identify as non-binary (Darwin 2017), as the available cultural narratives claiming to account for trans experience—for example, the monolithic perception that trans individuals were “born in the wrong body” (Fink and Miller 2014), or the perception that all transgender individuals desire medical intervention (Yeadon-Lee 2009)—may not effectively account for their own experiences. Many express insecurities about whether their identity claims are being perceived as authentic—whether they are “trans enough” to justify claiming a transgender identity label.

While we might expect these worries to be attenuated within the context of queer- or trans-affirming spaces, this isn't always the case. In fact, with their focus on individualistic self-definition and the deconstruction of identity categories, some queer spaces inadvertently reproduce the same inter-community dynamics that perpetuate queer marginalization, a process that Jason Orne has termed queernormativity (2017). According to Orne, emphasizing the fluidity or deconstruction of identity refocuses participants' attention on the rhetorical, ensuring that those who frequent these spaces remain attuned to the language they are using to describe others and to whether it is sufficiently inclusive. Rather than remediating the inequality present in these spaces, Orne argued that this tension places community members "in the line of fire," forever on guard against the possibility of having their access to the space questioned or undermined. Within queernormative systems, participants are so preoccupied with ensuring that they are "queer enough" to merit access that they re-instantiate the same social hierarchies that serve to marginalize queer people outside of these spaces. As others have noted, a similar process—what Austin Johnson (2017) terms "transnormativity"—helps regulate gender expression and performance within trans communities. As Johnson explains, "In addition to accountability to hegemonic standards of sex category and gender, trans people are also held accountable to transnormative standards that are specific to trans people as a group . . . an ideology that structures trans identification, experience, and narratives into a *realness* or *trans enough* hierarchy that is heavily reliant on accountability to a medically-based, heteronormative model" (emphasis in original; 467-8).

In this chapter, I ask how trans people²⁵ engage with these expectations: how they do the work of preparing and presenting narratives that can be assessed as “trans enough.” I find that non-binary and binary-identified trans participants responded to this pressure in different ways: the strategies favored by non-binary respondents (especially those who had not accessed medical transition) tended to minimize fluidity, while binary-identified respondents were more willing to acknowledge the ways in which their own stories diverged from dominant representations. As I demonstrate below, these strategic variations shape personal understandings of self and identity, but they also help to direct longer-term social and cultural change.

Tracing the Dominant Discourse

In order to determine whether their own narratives were questionable, respondents first had to cultivate a sense of which gender narratives were culturally legitimate. Each participant on the project was asked to describe their perceptions of the “dominant narrative” of trans identity, explaining how and whether their own experiences aligned with these representations.

The most frequently cited element of this discourse was the belief that gender-variant behavior makes itself obvious in early childhood, and that those who are “truly” trans are unable to conceal or deny this variance. As participant Chloe (20, she/her), a trans woman, described, “The dominant narrative is, like, from the first thing you could say, you told your mom, ‘Oh, Mom, I’m the opposite gender.’” Rooted in essentialist interpretations of gender as innate or inborn, this narrative suggests that trans children are born with the understanding that their sex category and gender identity are out of alignment, and that most give voice to this disconnect within their first

²⁵ It is critical to remember that non-binary people do not *de facto* identify as trans: these are two separate categories, and while significant overlap exists between them, they cannot be presented as interchangeable. In this chapter, I deal *exclusively* with the experiences of participants that self-describe as trans, irrespective of whether (or not) they *also* claim non-binary identity.

few years of life. For those who come to identify as trans later in life, this apparent “delay” in self-recognition can cast a shadow of doubt: the older respondents were when they first came to identify themselves as trans, the more they seemed to fear that they would be challenged or regarded as illegitimate by others. As participant Rebecca (25, she/her) stated, “You hear all the time about people who knew when they were three or four—I didn’t know until I was 12 or 13, which gave me a lot of doubts to overcome.”

Others referenced tropes asserting that the typical trans-identified person feels “trapped” in the wrong body. Like the insistence on childhood awareness described above, these tropes draw upon binary conceptions of gender, re-establishing trans individuals as either men or women. Connor (24, he/him) explained, “When people talk about trans people, [they] usually see it as, like, being a woman trapped in a man’s body, or a man trapped in a woman’s body.” The desire to bring one’s body “into alignment” with one’s identified gender is essential to legitimating trans identity. By asserting their identities as men or women (and transforming their physical presentations to better reflect these identities), binary-identified trans people make it possible for others to “determine” their gender as men or women, reabsorbing them back into the binary gender system (Schilt and Westbrook 2014). Rahilly (2014) and Meadow (2011) find similar patterns in the accounts of parents raising gender-variant children, observing that parents sometimes leverage essentialist narratives (e.g., the “born this way” trope) as a means of affirming their children’s gender expression. These narratives afford some flexibility around gender expression, and even make space for transition, but they also reify trans status as an innate biological reality. Instead of “undoing” gender, those who assert identities as trans men or women “redo” gender, retrenching the existing system even as the system adjusts to accommodate them.

Respondents argued that some conflate the process of coming out as transgender with the process of initiating medical transition, implying that those with no interest in medical transition are less “serious” about their identities than those who seek treatment. For example, Casey (22, they/them), who identifies as genderqueer, stated, “I feel like that dominant narrative is that you have to medically get on hormones or blockers, get surgery. . . . [That’s] the central story of what makes someone trans, and you’re not as legitimate if you don’t do those.”

Finally, others suggested that experiences of struggle and unhappiness are also critical to establishing authenticity as a trans person. Drawing upon perceptions of trans identity as a form of mental illness, this trope emphasizes that trans identities are less legitimate if the experience of gender dysphoria does not significantly impair one’s daily functioning. For example, Willow (20, they/them), a 20-year-old gender-fluid person, wrestled with the question of whether her own dysphoria was significant enough to merit coming out:

It took me a while to be comfortable saying it. Like, you know, I haven’t had this huge giant struggle with gender my whole life . . . I haven’t struggled the same amount, so, you know, I shouldn’t complain.

These components—pervasive bodily discomfort, the ability to trace gender-variance throughout the life course, interpretations of trans identity as inborn or lifelong, and an awareness that one has had to struggle for recognition as their authentic gender—were reported by respondents across all categories as key elements of the discourse surrounding transgender identity in the United States. The absence of any one of these elements from their own stories seemed to promote self-doubt in respondents, stimulating awareness of their own identities as potentially invalid.

“Am I Trans Enough?”

Both groups of respondents indicated concern that because of their atypical life-history and transition narratives, they may not be entitled to claim the label “trans.” They worried that while they had experienced gender dysphoria (and, in many cases, were confident about their desire to transition), they might not be “trans enough” to justify adopting this label publicly. These anxieties were heightened, however, among those who identified as non-binary. As Casey (22, they/them) noted:

I did have to deal [with] feeling like I wasn’t trans enough . . . trans people in general already feel like they have to prove themselves, [that] they’re “man enough” or “woman enough” to be trans. . . . So that’s even worse for non-binary people, who don’t necessarily act “manly” or “girly.”

Feelings of inadequacy can also stem from a desire not to appropriate the terminology or the experiences of a cultural group unfairly. As Willow (20, they/them) remarked:

I guess I worry if I’m really trans enough, you know? . . . What right do I have to complain? I just don’t like being super girly, and sometimes, you know, I like to strap my boobs down and pretend I’m a guy. That’s not the same.

Willow explicitly and repeatedly equated trans identity with struggle, hardship, and tribulation. She suspects her claim to transness is inadequate, wondering whether she has suffered enough to “earn” it. It is possible that this insecurity stems from a fear that claiming a trans identity label may weaken the identity claims of other trans-identified people; it may also arise from a fear that claiming the label publicly will invite further challenges to legitimacy, which she may feel unprepared to defend against.

Finally, some respondents voiced their concern about a phenomenon they referred to as “trans-trending”—the belief that some young people may claim trans identities as a means of appearing “trendy” or unconventional. The rising prominence of trans-identified individuals in contemporary media and the ongoing proliferation of gender identity categories (see Fink and Miller 2014) have led some to worry that others will interpret their claim to a trans identity as a plea for attention. As trans man Hayden (21, he/him) explained:

My mom has said that she can’t believe all these trans individuals popping up in the media today, and that she thinks that it’s a passing trend . . . when she was younger, [nobody] talked about it, nobody heard about it. And so I think that this society kind of thinks it’s a trend.

As an effect of these anxieties, many respondents feel a pressure to marshal “evidence” from their pasts that will demonstrate how their own narratives parallel the dominant narrative. For most respondents, this process involved isolating memories of gender discomfort from childhood and then deploying these memories as “proof” of an early gender-variant identification. Interview narratives indicate that binary-identified and non-binary respondents approached this project in different (and consequential) ways.

Binary-Identified Respondents

Nearly all of the binary-identified respondents indicated that they had re-examined their childhoods in the aftermath of coming out, wondering whether their childhood experiences affirmed their present-day identities. As previously discussed, medical and legal gatekeepers retain the potential to discredit narratives that do not establish an adequate link between childhood dysphoria and present-day trans identification (Yeadon-Lee 2009; Meyerowitz 2004), and

respondents seeking transition face an especially high-stakes pressure to ensure that their narratives are convincing. As Gina (25, she/her), a 25-year-old trans woman, stated:

Ominously, there have never been any indications whatsoever [that I was a woman]. Lots of people say that they are . . . surprised—that there was never anything really feminine about me. . . . So I constantly try and self-validate, to dispel my doubts, reaching back [to] grab anything that I can as evidence.

The validating evidence provided by respondents encompassed “diagnostic indicators” from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM)—a classification from the American Psychiatric Association—such as childhood cross-dressing and feelings of “gender apathy” (i.e., a generalized disinterest in gender expectations). Respondents cited preferences for toys (e.g., cars and action figures for those assigned female at birth, dolls and dress-up clothes for those assigned as male), particular hairstyles or clothing choices, and social pursuits stereotypically associated with the “opposite” sex. These interests were described by respondents as early warning signs of gender variance, regardless of whether others had identified them as such at the time. For example, as Ariel (23, she/her), a trans woman, explained:

I had a lot of the warning signs that everyone always talks about . . . my parents thought I was gay from a young age. I liked to play with dolls . . . I would say my favorite color was purple, or that I loved pink, and everyone’s like, “That’s a girl color!”

Connor (24, he/him) recalled similarly gender-stereotyped memories from his youth:

I took a lot of pride in being a tomboy, and, like, in hating girl things, and hating makeup, all that stuff when I was a kid. . . . Like, I hated shaving my legs, and I hated when I had to wear a sports bra . . . I hated wearing dresses. So turning out to be a guy wasn’t really a surprise.

Most respondents were able to present several examples of gender-variant behavior from their childhoods, and they seemed eager to explain how this behavior validated their current identities as men or women. Interestingly, however, some—perhaps as an effect of being discredited previously by therapists, parents, and other community members—evaluated these behaviors with skepticism, even in cases where highlighting them would provide personal validation. Even Ariel (23, she/her), who had no trouble spooling off a litany of “signs” affirming her childhood gender variance, was quick to note, “But . . . I mean, it’s a hindsight thing . . . It’s easy to look at stuff and try to be like, ‘Oh, yeah, that totally validates everything I’m going through now!’” Several other respondents expressed similar sentiments. Gina (25, she/her), quoted earlier, explained at a later point in her interview that her efforts to “self-validate” were often unsuccessful, given a persistent fear that she might misrepresent her experiences. “I try and describe, like, the desire for long hair . . . but I never really thought of it that way, as a gender thing,” she explained. “It was just something that I wanted. There are [pictures] of me playing with dolls as a child. I try and write that into an example, but maybe there was just a doll lying around. I don’t know.”

For some respondents, this skepticism seemed to play a verifying role of its own. Challenging one’s own narrative served as a means of testing one’s identification, putting it under the same fire that a therapist or other doubting party might in an effort to discredit it. Being explicit about one’s own experiences, even when they failed to align with prevailing cultural accounts, actually worked to bolster some respondents’ faith in the truth of their own narratives. Jason (31, he/him), a trans man, explained how a refusal to revise his story gave him a greater sense of confidence:

I try not to be revisionist. You know, certainly, “I should have been a guy” was a thought that I had [in childhood] . . . [but] packing at a young age, or this desire to somehow assert [that] my physique was really more male. . . nowadays, [I] cluster those experiences

together . . . [but] those things were all very isolated from one another at the time. It's important to me to remember my own process.

For some, like Jason, questioning or testing one's own narrative can actually serve as a source of greater conviction. However, as I argue, for many—particularly those in the sample who identified as non-binary—these questions stimulate more angst than affirmation.

Non-Binary Respondents

In many cases, the evidence provided to account for the childhood experiences of non-binary respondents was exactly the same as that provided by their binary-identified counterparts. In fact, non-binary respondents—particularly those with little interest in physical transition—seemed to rely the most heavily on stereotyped, binarized representations of gender in describing their identity development. In this sample, non-binary respondents were more likely than binary-identified respondents to leverage gender-stereotyped tropes in their identity narratives, some of which were so patently congruent with stereotype as to seem almost scripted. Consider, for example, the two excerpts below from interviews with gender-fluid respondents, each in response to the injunction, “Tell me a little bit more about yourself.” Marilyn (26, she/her), said:

I was always a tomboy. When I was little, I used to ask my mom to cut my hair, because even then, I knew that was what I wanted. I hated dresses. You know . . . things like going to McDonalds and being just devastated that they gave me, like, the Barbie toy instead of the Hot Wheels toy. I didn't understand why they didn't just see that I wanted a Hot Wheels.

Willow (20, they/them) shared a similar memory:

I remember as a little kid, you know, like, begging for action figures, or Hot Wheels at

McDonalds, whatever, and getting Barbies and, you know, girl toys. It made me really frustrated and sad . . . I refused to wear dresses or skirts or anything outside of church. I got my hair cut short as a kid, and I started wearing, you know, boys' clothes.

The two selections are almost identical. While a series of shared experiences may seem to indicate little, statements where the language is replicated nearly word-for-word evidence institutionalized tropes: the elements of the dominant narrative that listeners are most likely to recognize. It seems odd to encounter this overreliance on gendered stereotypes among participants that explicitly devalue and oppose such stereotypes. Yet, these gender-specific tropes and descriptors are the only signifiers accessible to respondents who seek to establish themselves as transgender. To document that they are not cisgender, non-binary respondents must demonstrate that they displayed gender-incongruent behavior as children, and the only intelligible means of demonstrating this is to document their interest in cross-gender pursuits and behaviors while growing up. Instead of seeking to prove themselves as men or women, non-binary respondents may seek to establish themselves as trans. Yet the ongoing cultural conflation of trans identity with opposite-sex identification creates an interactional slippage that renders the two endeavors functionally one and the same.

For example, where binary-identified respondents tended to express reservations or skepticism about the significance of their uncovered “proof,” often claiming that it took them a period of time to sort out the implications of their gender-atypical behavior as children and to recognize it as a hallmark of their trans identity, non-binary respondents were far more likely to assert that they had “always known” their gender status (as well as less likely to admit to having questioned their identities as trans). Marilyn (26, she/her) recalled:

[Mom] says I came home from school one day . . . and I told her that the girls wouldn't play with me because I was a boy, but that the boys wouldn't play with me because I was

a girl. And she asked me, you know, where did that leave me? And I told her, at, like, five years old, “I’m on the line.” I have always, *always* been this way.

Participant Jem (38, they/he), who self-described as genderqueer, echoed this sentiment, saying:

Growing up, I always had identified as — as male, I guess. . . . One of the earliest memories I have is a very specific memory from the age of 5, [a] memory of trying to be a boy. . . . I was always very different.

This observation carries implications for understanding how non-binary individuals might drive longer-term change to the gender order. Regardless of respondents’ personal feelings about the gender binary or their intentions to challenge it, if the accounts produced by non-binary individuals do more to reify this binary than the accounts of trans individuals who identify as men or women, this suggests that non-binary identity narratives may be less effective in promoting institutional change than the boundary-troubling accounts produced by those whose genders are more readily recognizable. Those who identify within the binary—whether cis or trans—can experiment with gender presentation or subvert gendered stereotypes without undermining their own visibility in the process.

It is also important to consider the role of physical transition as a potential mediator of these effects. Most binary-identified respondents involved with pilot data collection for this project (10 out of 11) had already taken permanent steps to bring their bodies into closer alignment with their identities. Hormones and surgery have the effect of reconnecting gender to the body, investing respondents with physical “proof” of their gender identities. Often, transitioning bodies are perceived as “serious” and “real” in ways that queer, non-transitioning bodies are not—they affirm fixity rather than fluidity, demonstrating an irrevocable commitment to moving through the world as a gender different from the category to which one was assigned at birth (Stone 2013).

This sense of validation, once bestowed, can help some to feel more comfortable pushing expressive boundaries than they felt prior to their transition. Indeed, genderqueer respondent Jem (38, they/he) reported that while he had previously embraced a public identity as male, his transition process and experiences on hormones had authenticated his status as a man to a point where he felt at ease experimenting with a more fluid presentation of self:

I always say, [you] know, I'm "FTM," but I'm *female-to-ME*. Initially, I went in being all female-to-male, and the whole thing about two genders and I have to choose one, and that's sort of how my story starts . . . although I would ideally like to be somewhere in that middle space, at that point, I just needed [to] make myself more comfortable in my own body, so I started taking hormones. . . . And [now], I've sort of come full circle, just being who I am, rather than trying to be somebody that I'm not.

Jem expressed feeling more fluid in his identity and presentation now than he did prior to his transition. However, he was only able to access that fluidity in the wake of the legitimizing effects of hormone therapy. By demonstrating that the person taking hormones has successfully bypassed medical and psychiatric gatekeeping measures, securing access to hormone therapy is one of the only conventionally accessible means of "proving" that one is "really" transgender. Respondents often reflected upon the legitimacy that their decision to pursue hormone therapy conferred, explaining that those who do not do so are likely to have their identities (or their commitment to those identities) questioned. As Hayden (21, he/him) explained:

When I first came out as trans, I was worried that since I just called myself trans, people wouldn't . . . take me seriously. And I know that a few individuals, before hormones or surgery or anything, [feel] like they're not trans enough . . . but [that worry] quickly passed [for me] when I knew that there was more in the future for me, like hormones.

In acknowledging that his worry dissipated once he realized that there was "more in the future for [him]," Hayden attests to the legitimizing effects of HRT and other medical

interventions. Those who start hormone therapy have visible evidence that they are not “faking”: they have committed, taking action to change their presentation in ways that can’t be easily undone, and they have managed to persuade the relevant authorities that their experience of gender is credible. Once “earned” through these institutional processes, one’s authenticity cannot be so easily challenged—even if one’s presentation of self changes anew post-transition. Those who seek access to medical transition are aware of these potential privileges. At the same time, those who don’t seek to transition are often aware that they may be “burning a bridge” to social legitimacy—an awareness that can spike anxiety about authenticity, belonging, and whether one’s own presentation of self is “enough” to be taken seriously.

Conclusion

In an age that dares to proclaim “the end of gender” (Serano 2014), many trans-identified individuals are eager to advance the claim that gender is no longer meaningful, or that gender need not play a role in organizing their social lives. While some of the respondents profiled here were similarly critical of gender, saying things like “I’m just gonna do me” (Connor, 24, he/him) or “I don’t think gender really means anything” (Willow, 20, they/them), the efforts made to account for gender in these interviews underscores a different perspective: one where the privileging of some narratives over others constitutes a foundation for the reproduction of recognizable and internally consistent gendered selves.

For trans individuals to be recognized as their expressed gender, they must justify their perception of themselves as gender-incongruent. In making decisions about which pieces of “evidence” to present, trans people—of all genders—help to construct the social frameworks that others use to make sense of trans lives. In relying on narrative tropes that reaffirm binary gender distinctions, trans people may make themselves visible as trans, but they offer their tacit

endorsement of the binary system in the process. Their efforts have striking implications for the political project of “undoing” gender, suggesting that the very rhetorical maneuvers that render non-binary individuals intelligible as trans individuals reaffirm binary gender distinctions rather than destabilizing them.

While both groups of narratives leveraged gendered stereotypes, non-binary respondents deployed these elements differently, relying more heavily than the trans men and women interviewed on binary rhetoric and strict gender category distinctions. That these narratives don’t dismantle gender is not a failure of the actors’ efforts, but a failure of the existing cultural and institutional infrastructure to support those efforts and render them socially intelligible. Trapped between two conflicting desires—the desire to resist classification as male or female, and the desire to claim identification as trans—non-binary people find themselves walking a treacherous tightrope, with invisibility on one side and unintelligibility on the other. In contrast, those who claim identities aligned with the existing system have the freedom to present more complicated, boundary-challenging accounts of their experience, although they may claim less personal investment in doing so.

My purpose in developing this argument is not to suggest that the accounts produced by non-binary individuals are insufficient to enact change, or that those with more fluid presentations should be keener to assert them. Instead, I suggest that the work of undoing gender should not fall to those with the largest interactional burden to bear. As Connell (2010) has rightly noted, trans individuals are uniquely positioned to help us make sense of how we might “undo” gender, and we would do well as gender scholars to center trans perspectives in our own work, especially where these perspectives may previously have been obscured or overlooked (Vidal-Ortiz 2009). However, it is not trans people alone—and certainly not non-binary individuals in particular—that

retain the capacity to disrupt gender. By centering non-binary individuals as the core arbiters of gender's deconstruction, we allocate this labor to precisely those respondents with the most abject social barriers to overcome. While binary-identified trans people may be constrained in their ability to "undo" masculinity and femininity, they can—and must—use the privilege offered by their perceived authenticity to work toward undoing the archetypal accounts of trans experience outlined above. Moreover, if we aspire to "undo" gender, we should start by turning our attention to cisgender people, asking them to take up the task of undoing gender in their own day-to-day lives. Just as the active engagement of whites will be necessary to end racism and the participation of the wealthy requisite to ending class conflict, long-term change to the gender order cannot and will not take shape without the sustained, intentional investment of the actors that have the most to lose.

CHAPTER 5: ACCOUNTING FOR GENDER IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

Online communities and social networking sites serve as integral social spaces for trans, non-binary, gender non-conforming, and gender-questioning young people. In addition to providing youth with a (comparatively) safe space to socialize and form relationships, these virtual spaces also help to organize the identity projects of many trans and gender non-conforming (hereafter TNB+) teens and young adults (Fink & Miller 2014; Renninger 2015). Social networking platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr offer their users unique constellations of tools for conceptualizing and representing gender, affording users a measure of control over their gender presentation that may be difficult to access in their offline lives (Darwin 2017), decentering the body as the primary source of “truth” about the gendered self. As a consequence, many TNB+ people find the identity and body projects they carry out in virtual spaces to be deeply empowering (Costello 2011; Marciano 2014; Fink & Miller 2014; Renninger 2015).

However, while gender performances can be manipulated online in unique ways, online environments do not eliminate gender (Kendall 1998; Van Doorn 2011; Daniels 2009). Indeed, we remain just as accountable (West & Zimmerman 1987) for our gender presentation online as we do in our offline lives. When the embodied cues we typically leverage to impute gender and sex are attenuated or obscured, narrative claims come to take on a greater salience; the relative decentralization of the body necessitates that users “do” gender differently than they might in offline spaces. As a consequence, remaining accountable for gender and gender identity online necessitates no small amount of creativity and adaptability on the part of social media users,

demanding ongoing (and constantly evolving) interactional labor. Moreover, the work required to effectively “do” gender in many online spaces can render users vulnerable, opening them up to the possibility of harassment (both from hostile outsiders, and from others within their own communities).

Studying gender presentation and gender attribution in virtual worlds can help us to understand how gender is “done” in the absence of the body — how we continue to enforce accountability to gender, even when traditional methods of sex categorization fail, and how these new ways of policing gender come to transform users’ understandings of self over time. In this chapter, I explain how decentralization of the physical body online — taken as a source of great potential and promise, for many TNB+ users — introduces a new set of accountability constraints for demonstrating and claiming gender identity in online spaces. I then elaborate a series of risks that these new standards for “proving” one’s authenticity as TNB+ may present for users, and elaborate the broader significance of these changes, both for the sociological understanding of gender accountability and for the life outcomes of users themselves.

Accounting for Gender: A Summary Account

Microsociologists have studied interactional accountability processes for decades, and a great deal of this scholarship has centered on accountability to gender and gender performance (Garfinkel 1967; West & Zimmerman 1987; Kessler & McKenna 1978; Hollander 2013; Friedman 2014; Darwin 2017; shuster 2017). In order to be seen by others as appropriately gendered subjects, we must deliver performances of gender that leverage culturally-intelligible signifiers — physical and social cues that others will readily recognize. West and Zimmerman, for example, have classically argued that the production of gender is “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (1987,

p. 127). This activity is “managed,” they explain, through the strategic manipulation of “gender displays” — the *performances*, laden with gendered significance, that we offer to those around us as we try to interact (p. 129).

In general, within the context of face-to-face interaction, this process of attribution is a visual process. Garfinkel’s much-renowned (and much-critiqued) study of “Agnes,” regarded today as the “locus classicus of sociological research about transgender people” (Schilt 2016), stands as testimony to the centrality of these visual representations. As Garfinkel writes:

Agnes’ appearance was convincingly female. She was tall, slim, with a very female shape...She had long, fine dark-blonde hair, a young face with pretty features, a peaches-and-cream complexion, no facial hair, subtly plucked eyebrow, and no makeup except for lipstick...Her usual manner of dress did not distinguish her from a typical girl of her age and class. There was nothing garish or exhibitionistic in her attire, nor was there any hint of poor taste or that she was ill at ease in her clothing, as is seen so frequently in transvestites [*sic*]...(1967, p. 60).

Indeed, it is this seeming “ease” with which Agnes comports herself physically that enabled Agnes’s surgical team to justify her access to vaginoplasty. Agnes’s surgeon, Dr. Robert Stoller, believed wholeheartedly that Agnes was a “natural” woman — that is, that her gender dysphoria stemmed not from her psyche, but rather from some organic, biological defect, which surgical intervention could be employed to rectify. Had Agnes appeared unable to present herself as a “normal” woman in the presence of the surgical team, Stoller would have found it more challenging to justify such drastic intervention — to *himself*, as well as to other surgical faculty. When it later came to light that Agnes’s feminine-appearing secondary sex characteristics were in fact a product of treatment with exogenous estrogen (rather than the artifact of an undiagnosed intersex condition, as Stoller had previously hypothesized), both Stoller and Garfinkel were heavily repudiated. James Coleman himself penned a scathing take-down of Garfinkel’s work on Agnes for the *American Journal of Sociology*, in which he argued that it was “hard to trust any of

Garfinkel's theoretical project when he had been so easily 'fooled' by a 'male transvestite'" (Schilt 2016, p. 292).

Other gender scholars have underscored the role that visual assessments play in helping to facilitate and organize social interaction. In describing the case of a gender-"ambiguous" sales clerk that one of their respondents encountered in an electronics store, West and Zimmerman read through a litany of physical attributes — the presence or absence of facial hair, the width of the shoulders, the size of the hands and fingers, the pitch of the voice — that might have helped to validate the clerk's sex category. They draw a parallel to the work of Kessler and McKenna, who elaborated a similar argument: "Illustratively, [Kessler and McKenna] cite the child who, viewing a picture of someone clad in a suit and tie, contends, 'it's a man, because he has a pee-pee' (Kessler and McKenna 1978, p. 154). Translation: 'He must have a pee-pee...because I see the insignia of a suit and tie'" (West & Zimmerman 1987, p. 132).

More recently, Asia Friedman's work on "sexpectations" has demonstrated that even trans people — a population that Friedman suspected would evaluate visual information about sex category in a more nuanced, less binary way than members of the general population — leverage these types of cues, both in analyzing the self-presentation of others and in assessing their own (2014). While scholars like Shuster (2017) have shown us how non-visual elements of presentation (such as talk/language use) also have a part to play in validating gender performance, these elements are often treated as secondary to embodiment in face-to-face interactions. The labels that a person uses to describe their experience of gender, for example, tend to carry less empirical weight in interaction than do observers' perceptions of the body (as anyone who has been on the receiving end of a cautiously-ventured "But you don't look like a(n) X..." can surely testify).

While this emphasis on appearance has profound implications for interaction, it is critical to consider that trans and gender non-conforming people are not only held accountable interactionally for their embodiment of gender; they are also held to “account” for their bodies institutionally, in their interactions with the state. The infrastructure of contemporary social life is organized comprehensively around the binary gender system, from our judicial system (Jenness & Fenstermaker 2014; Spade 2015) to our healthcare system (shuster 2021) to the collection of national demographic and statistical data like the Census (Schilt & Bratter 2015). The “administrative violence” (Spade 2015) exerted by this system shapes the life outcomes of trans and gender non-conforming people in profound and inescapable ways, impacting everything from their ability to access food stamps to their ability to access cancer treatment (Spade 2015). As a consequence, trans and gender non-conforming people are frequently tasked with presenting “proof” of their gender status, in order to establish their institutional validity (e.g., Westbrook & Schilt 2014; Costello 2017; Meadow 2010).

However, experience alone — that is, a person’s stated *perception* of their gender identity — is generally considered insufficient evidence to establish gender. As Meadow (2010) has described, the process of defining an individual’s *legal* gender is generally fraught, unstable, and relational, involving a process of “excavation” in which medical providers, legal personnel, and agents of the State work collaboratively to “enumerate constellations of bodily and psychological indicia, and then provide social rationales for why some of gender’s indicia matter more than others” (Meadow 2010, p. 823). As Meadow further describes:

While no courts treat gender solely as an elective property of individuals, almost half of the courts allow for movement between gender statuses. The process of legitimation relies most heavily on medical procedures associated with treating transsexuality (efforts to surgically and hormonally align the physical and psychological gender of the litigant). Bodily change is the avenue through which litigants can contest anxieties about fraud (or

what we can really know to be true about an individual) and stability (what we can count on remaining true). (Meadow 2010, p. 823)

Thus, “proving” gender often comes back to documenting the “truth” of the flesh — to genitals, chromosomes, and other artifacts of a person’s *embodiment*. Those who would deny the legitimacy of trans identities make frequent recourse to the evident “reality” of the body — as, for instance, the Trump administration has done in seeking to define gender “on a biological basis that is clear, grounded in science, objective, and administrable...based on biological traits identifiable by or before birth” (Green et al 2018). At the time of this writing, 15 U.S. states will only approve a change of gender marker on a citizen’s birth certificate if provided a court order certifying that the applicant has undergone “sex-reassignment surgery,” with another 13 requiring affidavits affirming that the “medical evidence” provided (e.g., evidence of “appropriate treatment” by licensed medical professionals) is considered appropriate to grant the records update (Tobin 2020). Defining the trans status of *young* people -- poor candidates for surgical intervention -- is even more complex, and these tensions place trans and gender non-conforming children and young adults at the center of frequent, ongoing, and traumatic disputes about their institutional management: disputes which, again, often make recourse to the inevitability of the *body* (Meadow 2018).

Unsurprisingly, this tendency to center the body as the locus of gendered “reality” serves as a source of anxiety and conflict for many TNB+ people. Although only a fraction of gender non-conforming individuals are interested in attempting to “pass” as cis (Johnston 2019), virtually all TNB+ people — both those that identify as transgender, and those that do not — hold some stake in attempting to shape others’ interpretations of their presentation. Even those who deliberately endeavor to disrupt the gender binary and to complicate the notion of “passing” must

undertake significant interactional labor in this regard, as the success of these efforts is contingent upon their recognition by others (Garrison 2018). Even if we try to adhere to cultural expectations for gender performance, it is impossible to ensure that others will interpret these performances in the way that we've intended. While all of us -- transgender, cisgender, and otherwise -- tailor our physical presentation of self in order to shape others' perceptions of us (Goffman 1959), this management of our bodies is only half the battle: if others are unwilling or unable to recognize our performances, or if our bodies discredit us so profoundly that manipulating the body's appearance is insufficient to compensate (Goffman 1963), then others' assessments of our bodies can continue to shape our interactions in ways that we hadn't intended (and might often have preferred to avoid).

e-Scaping Accountability? Gender Embodiment in “Disembodied” Space

The potential that the Internet, as a medium, affords users to subvert this dynamic is precisely one of the mechanisms that has helped to make online communities such anchors for the socialization of TNB+ young people (Fink & Miller 2014; Brophy 2010; Whittle 1998). As discussed in the introductory chapter, LGBTQ-identified youth are disproportionately active online, even relative to others in their age cohort (Fox & Ralston 2016), and TNB+ people especially so (Palmer et al 2013). TNB+ young people leverage online communities and social networking sites to express, conceptualize, and manage their personal identities (Fox & Ralston 2016; Cooper & Dzara 2010; Fox & Warber 2015; Gudelunas 2012; Cavalcante 2019), to plan and rehearse “coming out” experiences (Duguay 2016; Fox & Warber 2015), to connect with valuable social support (Baams et al 2011; Fink & Miller 2014; Marciano 2014), and to share resources with other users (Renninger 2015; Fink & Miller 2014), laying the necessary foundation for political mobilization and collective action (Cooper & Dzara 2010; Renninger 2015). In essence,

these spaces provide LGBTQ+ young people with opportunities to explore self-presentation that allow them to feel empowered and secure (Cavalcante 2019).

For trans youth in particular, the ability to mediate others' interpretations *of the body* is a special (and particularly attractive) perk of online spaces. While recent scholarship in new media studies has done much to counter Web-1.0-era utopian visions of the Internet as an "identity playground" (Turkle 1995) where embodied identifications like gender and race were (erroneously) thought to lose salience and meaning (Hansbury 2011), it remains the case that users retain a greater degree of control over the presentation of their bodies online than would be possible in many offline contexts. For example, Buse has demonstrated how senior citizens — another group frequently discredited or ignored on the basis of physical appearance — deploy the Internet's representational tools to create "new images of the aging body, and for escaping the negative judgements based on its outward appearance" (2010, p. 1001). Lupton (2017) explores online fat activism and body positivist movements, elaborating how virtual spaces contribute to esteem-building body projects for those marked as "obese," and Davis and Chansiri (2018) have discussed how users with physical disabilities leverage online presentation of self to circumvent discrimination in the workplace. Following from this work, scholars like Marciano (2014) have discussed how trans and non-binary people might benefit from the virtual context's capacities to obscure the body, creating an "alternative world" (Marciano 2014, p. 835) where interactions that would be risky or inaccessible in unmediated contexts -- for instance, sexual encounters (Hansbury 2011) -- become tangible possibilities. In this sense, de-centering of the body online may serve as a locus of empowerment for trans users, allowing them to elude aspects of their physical presentation that have served to marginalize them in offline interactions (Cover 2012; Brophy 2010).

For others, accessing empowerment online is less about *escaping* the body, and more about *controlling* or *styling* it. For example, as Costello (2011) has argued in his work on embodiment in Second Life, many TNB+ people use virtual spaces to construct idealized representations of self — representations that may feel even more “real” or authentic to users than their physical bodies do. Others have argued that the online context itself has helped to facilitate new readings of bodies — that it opens up opportunities for users to “do” gender in ways that subvert simple categorization and resist the existing gender binary. For instance, Darwin (2017) describes how genderqueer and non-binary Internet users have leveraged platforms like Reddit to “problematize binary gender attribution” (p. 326), strategically constructing representations of self that appear to blend or mix gender signifiers (in order to evade attribution as a “man” or “woman”), or which intentionally signal trans status (for example, revealing the presence of a chest binder in a photo, thus working to ensure one’s attribution as trans). Many find these online identity projects to be both socially and individually rewarding.

While decentralization of the body online has been empowering for many gender non-conforming people, online contexts have also transformed the ways in which we manifest our *accountability* to gender. The work of “doing gender” -- conducting a credible and culturally intelligible gender performance (West & Zimmerman 1987) -- is differently bounded in virtual spaces, organized around different social and cultural cues. In this chapter, I discuss how my participants worked to manifest their accountability to gender in online spaces, and then assess some of the implications of this differential bounding for our understanding of social media (and our understanding of trans youth).

Beyond the Body: Benefits of Negotiating Gender Attribution Online

As predicted, many of my participants found the displacement of physical gender signifiers from their interactions online to be rewarding. Many -- particularly those that had not accessed medical transition -- had been on the receiving end of intrusive questions from others in their lives (or from strangers) as a result of their gender presentation. Some, like Xan, had been discredited outright, their identity claims (and, in Xan's case, their claims to healthcare access) rejected as a consequence of their "failed" gender performance:

Xan (20, he/they): I went to see one psychiatrist, and he looked me up and down and told me, 'do you really think you're presenting as male right now?' Like, [with] my chest binded back as tight as it could go, hairy legs to hell, and cargo shorts. And he asked me, 'do you really think you're presenting as male?'

The struggle to become culturally intelligible in 'meatspace' was particularly daunting for non-binary, genderqueer, and gender-fluid people. As discussed in Chapter 4, social intelligibility as a non-binary or gender non-conforming person hinges on the recognition of others: "strangers often miscategorize [non-binary people] as masculine girls or feminine boys, because they do not recognize non-binary gender when they see it" (Darwin 2017, p. 325). Participant Vinny (22, they/them), for instance, explained, "I think it's harder to be trans in public or in real life, simply because I'm not androgynous, at all...I have a very standard female-looking body...so no one is ever going to see me and assume that I'm trans, ever." River, too, reported that their hopes of being recognized as non-binary on sight had been thwarted by cis assumptions:

River (23, they/them): Part of me just kind of hoped that people would look at me and be able to, like, assume that I was androgynous, and not misgender me. And that really didn't -- that really didn't work. People still assumed I was a girl. And, uh -- just sort of, like, all the awkwardness about telling people what my pronouns were, and stuff like that, and

having to correct people? I wanted to avoid that somehow, but, you know, most people...would assume that it's either female or male. So there was really no winning there.

As West and Zimmerman (1987) describe, gender attribution takes place instinctively and intuitively -- more often than not, it is an *unconscious* process, occurring within nanoseconds of encountering a person. With no stable, enculturated signifiers of non-binary identity that cis people can readily recognize, it's rare for cis observers to identify strangers as non-binary -- even in cases where their physical presentation has been strategically crafted in an effort to muddle gender cues. This tendency for onlookers to elide non-binary people *back* into the binary can make online spaces -- where a user's pronouns and identity label can be made available on sight -- seem particularly attractive to non-binary and gender-fluid people, who might otherwise be persistently misrecognized.

People who are binary-aligned also stand to benefit from this decentralization of the body -- particularly people whose bodies 'out' them in public spaces, or whose physicality prevents them from being read in the ways they'd wish to be read, as participant Ben (19, he/they) explained:

I know a lot of people that identify as trans on the Internet, but in real life, they're in the closet completely...I know [some] trans women who are like this -- where they'll have, like, female characters online, but then in real life, they don't medically transition...because they feel like no one will take them seriously. They feel like, 'I could never be a real girl'...I see that happen a lot. Like, people in real-life trans spaces -- most of the people in those spaces are usually the people who can pass...

Thus, one of the major benefits of virtual environments is that they afford users an opportunity to define their identity *from the outset*, in a digital bio or as a part of their profile description. As Malachi (20, they/he) described, “[Offline], I don't feel like I have any control over how people are reading me. I don't know what people see when they look at me...[Online],

that's different." The provisional "disembodiment" afforded by many online environments allows users to choose whether to keep their bodies concealed, granting them an opportunity to escape or visual attribution. As Milo (21, he/they) explained, "It's easy [online], because no one hears your voice or sees your face first...so it's very easy to establish yourself as the gender that you are, rather than the gender that others perceive you to be." Participant Marcel (22, he/they) summarized, "I don't want to be, like, defined by my appearance -- and being able to, like, be freed of my physical body is -- is liberating, in a sense." Echoing this idea, non-binary participant Brynn (22, they/she) constructed an elegant metaphor invoking a mirrored "mask" to describe their frustration with other people's efforts to collapse them into one binary category or the other -- a dynamic that digital environments allowed them to subvert:

I know who -- roughly -- *I* want to be, and what *I* want to look like. But, like -- what I came to realize was that the labels meant more to other people, and they will impose what [label] they want to, regardless of what you say. And so...I came to a point where I'm, like, 'Fine. If that's the way they want to see it, then that's the way they can see it.' Like, the way I described it to some of my friends who are in a similar boat, is, like, a 'mirror mask.' Basically, you know, it's like a mask made out of a mirror -- you put it on, and people look at you, and they see reflected back what they want to see, what they expect to see...[but online], like, I haven't ever posted a picture of my face, or anything like that...[so] I don't have anything to hide. I can just put forward what I think, what I feel, what I want to be. I don't have to wear the mirror mask.

Claiming a trans or non-binary identity in virtual spaces also enables users to escape the interactional "awkwardness" River (23, they/them) described that can come along with asserting one's pronouns. Listing pronouns in one's bio or blog header not only minimizes the risk of being misgendered by others, but also saves users the time and emotional energy expended by repeated requests for pronoun clarification. As participant Charlie (24, he/they) acknowledged, "I feel like I should always say, 'Well, these are my pronouns,' or 'this is who I am,' but I don't know that I

want to expend the emotional labor to explain it -- and then have to *re-explain* it, over and over.” Making pronouns clear and visible from the outset eliminates these demands. Vinny (22, they/them) explained that virtual contexts can also help to separate users from their histories -- at least, to a degree -- in ways that might prove more challenging in offline interactions:

I would say when you're online, it's easy to just slap on a really masc photo of yourself, or an avatar that isn't you, and --- if you introduce yourself -- be like, "Hey, 'sup? I'm Vinny. What's up, guys?" Like “hey, use they/them pronouns, please”...if you introduce yourself a certain way, people don't have that preconceived notion of “this is [deadname], [deadname] is a girl.”

Online contexts can also feel like a comparatively *low-risk* context for identity disclosure -- particularly relative to many in person spaces, where the risks of physical violence for trans people can feel omnipresent and all-consuming. In meatspace, the consequences of a “failed” gender performance can be truly life-altering (or even life-ending). Transgender people are four times more likely to be the victims of violent crime than are cisgender people (Flores et al 2021). While survey data on the violence encountered by transgender people is scarce (and nearly all types of violence are under-reported, due to fear of non-response or of re-victimization by support agencies -- see FORGE 2012), the most recent iteration of the U.S. Transgender Survey found that nearly 10% of trans people had been physically attacked within the previous 12 months as a result of their trans status (James et al 2016). Similarly, 10% had been sexually assaulted within the previous 12 months, with nearly half of all respondents (47%) reporting that they had been sexually assaulted at some point in their lives (James et al 2016). So many trans people are the victims of fatal violence that we have an annual observance to commemorate them and read off the names of the dead (Smith 2012). Being outed as trans or recognized as visibly gender non-conforming in public can be profoundly dangerous. For example, Cassidy -- a binary-aligned trans woman living

in rural Ohio -- described how an auto accident (in which she was not at fault) had turned into a frightening and vulnerable experience that deterred her from wearing feminine clothing outside of her house for many months:

Cassidy (18, she/her): I [was] in a car accident and totaled my car...I had a date with this girl that is part of the LGBT club I'm a part of. I went to Old Navy -- bought some new, cute clothes to put on. I got my makeup all did up. And then I was in the car, and I turned on to her street off of, like, a busy highway, and as I turned, I just got hit. And then the person who hit me spun and hit another car...[and] cops showed up, and all that -- as they should. But to be honest, it's a little awkward...being AMAB, standing in front of a police officer, wearing, like, a dress and makeup. [It was] just a scary, vulnerable moment.

Since virtual contexts generally introduce physical distance between users and those who might seek to harass or abuse them, disclosure can feel safer online. As participant Charlotte (21, she/they) summarized, "If I were to get misgendered or something in the real world, I don't actually often say anything about it, because it's -- like, especially in public, that's kind of scary. And especially [in] the Midwest, there might be hostility paired with it, too. But online, I don't quite have as big a fear of that...there's less chance of someone challenging me, or being aggressive, or something, because it's -- normally, they don't see my face, don't hear my voice, and they don't have anything to make assumptions on, other than my username."

This isn't to say, of course, that bodies cease to matter in online contexts, or that visual information about bodies is irrelevant online. When users themselves or third parties make these kinds of embodied representations available to others, they are still used to make determinations about the credibility of users' identity claims. For example, user Kai (22, they/she/he) recalled a series of interactions in a trans-focused Facebook group that made their ambiguous embodiment a central point of contention:

I think sometimes, if I present more femininely online, a lot of people, like, really question my identity, which is weird. Like, I was in a trans group [on Facebook], and I had a picture of, like, me just wearing makeup with my, uh, fiancé — which, like — I don't know, at first glance, it's very 'cis,' I guess. And a lot of people were like, 'why are you even here?' If I had something to say, people would ignore it...

Kai's experience helps to illustrate that there are limitations to the "disembodiment" accessible to folks online. Where information about bodies is actively presented and made available to online audiences, audiences use this information to help inform their assessments of users' identity claims. Indeed, when presented, this information can even be used to 'overrule' claims to particular identity labels, as happened to Rigby (23, he/they):

I was in a group [on Facebook] where people were [making fun of a trans woman], like, 'ew, she's making other trans women look bad.' And I was just like, 'that's bullshit.' And then somebody, like, went through all of my photos on Facebook [and came back to the thread] to be like, 'you're obviously not even on hormones.' And I was...[but] she commented on some of my pictures, and was like, 'you're fake trans.'

However, while bodies continue to matter in these spaces, bodies alone are insufficient to establish identity in online contexts. Going online de-centers the body and liberates people from some of the interactional constraints their bodies might otherwise impose, but — at least, if they seek to join gender-focused spaces and associate with other TNB+ people — it doesn't free them from the interactional imperative to account for themselves as trans or gender non-conforming. Moreover, the project of establishing oneself as TNB+ operates differently online than it might in offline spaces. In particular, while the body retains some potential to help bolster or discredit identity claims, and while bodily representations may still convey important, interactionally-useful information to observers, the body doesn't get the final say on gender presentation like it might in many off-line contexts — it can be difficult to determine, based on images alone, what the "reality"

of a person's identity is. As Cameron (22, they/them) suggested, "I know people aren't gonna read me any one way [in my selfies]." Crystal (19, she/her) echoed this idea, saying, "I do feel like there is a pressure [online] to, like...[post] pictures, and whatnot. But posting pictures, even, to begin with...there's always, like, suspicions. Like, 'oh, is this person, like, fake? Or real?'" Online, bodies are often taken as unreliable narrators — part of the puzzle, but not the whole picture.

Manifesting Gender Accountability in Virtual Worlds

In many digitally-mediated contexts, presenting a particular kind of *embodied* gender performance is often less important than clearly stating one's gender *descriptor* of choice. When the body is decentralized, label-based and narrative-driven accounting come to take center stage. On most social media platforms, users have the ability to embed their gender label into a personal bio or append their pronouns onto the content they post -- choices that can enable users to circumvent the process of *embodied* gender attribution altogether. While spooling off a long list of identity descriptors to a stranger in person would feel uncomfortable, presenting one's preferred labels up front is common and expected online. As participant Jo (22, they/she) summarized, this practice can be rewarding for many trans and non-binary people, because it helps to reduce the risk of being misgendered:

I think it [labeling yourself] is definitely a little more important online, because online, they're just getting what you present them...if I meet someone [in person], like, I'll tell them my pronouns, and that's about it...[but] if you put it in your bio, then everyone knows when they go to your page...it's more like damage control, I guess. Like, people are less likely to just misgender you on purpose -- or on accident, or whatever. Some people will go look at your profile, to see what you are like...[they'll] look for your pronouns so that they can talk to you, before they send a message.

Including an identity label or pronouns in one's profile (or, alternatively, tagging posts or content with identity-specific hashtags) can also help users to more readily identify and connect with one another -- a major boon for many trans and non-binary people, who might otherwise have little exposure to others that are TNB+ (and feel socially isolated as a result). Cosmo (25, it/they), for instance -- a non-binary person that has intermittently self-defined as transmasculine, genderqueer, genderfluid, androgynous, gender-punk, and "genderfuck" -- explained that labels can serve both as a tool of self-definition *and* as a vehicle for community-building:

I feel like labels are a tool for visibility, and when we're visible, we feel -- we feel valid. But we also can use labels to define -- to find our kin, to find other people who are in the same communities...it can, at times, feel a bit compulsive [to put all of your labels out there at once]. But for me, it's -- it's more of a choice, and I *choose* to put all my labels out there...[because] I *do* want to be recognized, and find other people that are similar. And online, I'd say, um, labels are used a lot more. I know I personally use my labels a lot more online, uh, than I do in person.

Cameron (22, they/them), too, reflected upon the different capacities of labels in their interview, explaining that identity labels fulfill different interactional functions in digital spaces than they do in analog ones:

I think online, the work that labels do is to, you know -- [decide] who's in, who's out, create the boundaries...whereas offline, they're kind of more like signifiers? I feel like people can cohabitate [*sic*] with different labels better offline than they can online...[offline], you can relate to people with different labels, because you might not know what labels they use until you get deep into a conversation...[but] the cultural marker that we're, I think, more inclined to dwell on online is the label, because it's always there.

Cameron's assessment is interesting on multiple levels -- not only because it keenly parses the differences between how identity labels function in online versus in-person contexts, but because it speaks to an important tension that the focus on identity labels introduces into digitally-

mediated interactions. Trans and non-binary people -- often in possession of “unruly bodies” (Gay 2018) -- are frequently judged for their embodiment or their physical presentation on sight, and subverting this judgment online can be liberating. But the inverse is *also* true -- in off-line spaces, trans and non-binary people are much *less* likely to be taken to task for the *labels* they’ve chosen, simply because these labels are less readily accessible. The prominence and persistence of identity descriptors online helps to surmount some interactional challenges for TNB+ people, but it also introduces new ones.

For one thing -- and somewhat ironically -- the online emphasis on label-based identity claims-making has the potential to undermine community engagement and community-building processes: one of the core reasons that TNB+ users seek out online support communities to begin with. Just like TNB+ people in analog spaces, TNB+ social media users are tasked with demonstrating their accountability to gender expectations (and threatened with the invalidation and denigration of their identities, if they should fail). Social pressures — whether real or perceived — to demonstrate accountability to gender by producing the “right” kind of gender narrative can inhibit users from sharing their experiences freely, or can lead them to standardize their accounts in accordance with others in order to maximize their likelihood of being viewed as credible: both choices that seem to contest the unbounded “freedom of expression” theoretically afforded to trans people in virtual worlds.

For most participants, demonstrating accountability to gender online meant *unambiguously* and *prominently* labeling their identities, and ensuring that these designations remained *consistent* across the different platforms that they used. Many participants were explicit about the ways that they chose to define themselves and their identities online, hoping that their specificity would help to reduce the risk of confrontation. Presley (22, they/them), a non-binary person, explained, “In

my header on Tumblr, it straight up says that I use they/them pronouns, and I'm non-binary...I put my pronouns in my Instagram bio, too. The kind of people that follow me and that I follow have changed [since I came out], and that's how they know me -- that's the *only* way they know me.” Participant Ramona (20, they/he) echoed this sentiment, explaining that they too embedded pronouns and identity-specific language into their social media profiles:

We have to do different things online, to be seen as trans or gay. And sometimes that can just be, like — even if you don't put, like, 'I'm trans' in your profile...you'd put, like, even just a pronoun — like, 'he/him,' 'she/her,' just to be like — almost like a gentle nudge. [It's] very subtle sometimes.

Specifically (and publicly) naming one's identity online can help users to demonstrate their accountability to gender -- but at the same time, this practice introduces new vulnerabilities (particularly for trans and gender non-conforming people). One major issue is that physically tagging or labeling content with words that describe your identity -- especially if that identity is socially stigmatized -- can be dangerous, making it easier to target particular users (or groups of users) for harassment. A spate of recent research on virtual communities has demonstrated that the Internet holds allure for *many* groups stigmatized for their behavior, identity, or beliefs -- not just for LGBTQ people, people with disabilities, and people of color, but also for neo-Nazis and white supremacists (Hodge & Hallgimisdottir 2020; Conway et al 2019; Blee 2018), incels and “men's rights” advocates (Jones et al 2020; Ging 2019; Massanari 2017), TERFs (Tiffany 2020), and others with radical or terroristic views (Baele et al 2020). Because the Internet makes an excellent organizing space for these (and for other) radicalized populations -- *and* because so many conservative or extremist groups center anti-trans rhetoric as an anchor of their personal politics - - trans people face harassment online as an ongoing spectre, omnipresent and issuing from multiple directions. People with anti-trans agendas or beliefs will often “stalk” trans-focused hashtags and

interest groups online, hoping to create drama or to bait users into vulnerable situations (Scheuerman et al 2018). Ramona (20, they/he), for instance, described how TERFs treat the social media profiles of more prominent TNB+ users as “bait,” trawling through the comments on these high-profile posts to snare (and harass) smaller, more vulnerable fish:

Usually I think that they go to, like, more well-known trans people's profiles, and then they go and they look in the, um, -- like, their replies. Or, the, like -- and then they go and -- 'cause I've often noticed that when I get harassment, it's usually after retweeting, or interacting with a tweet from a more, like, famous or well-known trans person, versus, like, um, like, a -- somebody who's just a, like, a supporter.

Online harassment can be gravely serious. Being visibly trans or non-binary in ‘meatspace’ and being visibly trans online can *both* introduce the possibility of harassment, and while it’s true that a user’s odds of having their nose broken or their ribs cracked by a virtual assailant are low, the risks associated with online harassment are not ultimately *lesser* because they are digitally mediated -- they are simply *different*. Moreover, the *consequences* of online harassment are by no means bound to the digital domain: they can easily jeopardize victims’ employment or employability, undermine their friendships and relationships with family members, or even result in loss of life.

For example, the increasing availability (and transmissibility) of personally identifying information online -- for instance, users’ real names, as attached to social media profiles like Facebook -- has made it easier to identify social media users and to render them the targets of off-line harassment or violence. For example, the increasingly-prevalent practice of “doxxing” users, or releasing their identifying details (such as addresses, telephone numbers, workplaces, social security numbers, or personal photographs) to the online public, has created a significant threat to many users’ safety (Douglas 2016). Alt-right or anti-trans online communities (as well as

communities that are just into harassment “for the lulz,” like 4Chan) make a regular practice of hunting and doxxing trans users, some of whom lose their jobs or are subsequently outed to family members. For example, participant Ramona (20, they/he) had been unwittingly profiled on a “gender-critical” hate blog that previously hosted a weekly feature called “Non-Binary is Stupid,” which presented the names, ages, and photographs of trans and non-binary young people the blog owners had uncovered online, along with links to their social media profiles (for ease of harassment). Similarly, Cameron (22, they/them) -- while not a victim of doxxing themselves -- had watched in horror as a close transmasculine friend was doxxed and outed on the notorious Kiwi Farms, an online forum billed by *New York Magazine* as “the web’s biggest stalker community” (Pless 2016):

[Kiwi Farms is], like, an alt-right website where people go to get doxxed. And one of my friends, who’s a trans man, got doxxed on Kiwi Farms, and everyone was calling him, like, all these ridiculous slurs, and his dad found out, and the FBI got involved...it was really awful.

Likewise, Xan (20, he/they) -- a 20-year-old transmasculine person living in rural Texas - - feared so profoundly for his safety after being doxxed online that he temporarily “detransitioned,” reverting to his old name and pronouns and telling friends and family that he no longer identified as trans:

I wasn’t able to be safe and be true to myself at the same time, so now I outwardly dress and look more female, just for my safety...it started when I got doxxed. I got doxxed on 4Chan, and a bunch of other websites -- I think it was my ex’s doing. And it scared me, it really did. Not only that, but one of my neighbors would always sit in his truck outside with a shotgun, staring at me when I left the house and when I went back in...it was definitely [because of] that, because he had never acted that way before...[An anonymous user I suspect was my ex-partner] outed me. He posted my -- my chosen name, and my dead name. He put my address, my phone number, my e-mails. How many dogs I had. How to get into my house -- what the keycode password for the gate was. Stuff like that.

Even in cases where doxxing events don't lead to stalking, in-person harassment, or physical violence, the psychological damage instigated by these events can be devastating. Information released to the public online can be difficult or impossible to remove: as Douglas (2016) notes, entering the name of a doxxing victim into a search engine may continue to reveal the user's personal details (and accounts of the abuses perpetrated against them) for years or decades to come. Even more concerning is the rise of the closely related practice of "swatting," which Katherine Cross describes as:

The practice of making a false report to an emergency hotline (such as 911 in the US)...that precipitates an armed police response against a target's home. For instance, using information revealed in a dox, a harasser may call the police alleging that the target has taken hostages or is running an illegal drug laboratory. The purpose is to allege something so egregious that a SWAT team or its local equivalent will barge into the target's home, potentially injuring or even killing the target. (Cross 2019, p. 328).

While the risks of online harassment are profound, they are far from the only risks that young people face in adopting a trans or non-binary identity label online. Because labels have to be explicitly claimed and stated online to be legible to other people, the virtual context can create a pressure to embrace or commit to a label while a user is still exploring their identity, or before they're ready to disclose their identities to people in their offline lives. Indeed, it is well recognized that some trans and non-binary people intend *never* to reveal their identities to their families: some choose not to disclose (or are *compelled* not to disclose), and the Internet affords these users a rare opportunity for authentic self-expression, allowing them to actualize -- if only provisionally -- a part of their identities that would otherwise remain inaccessible to them. But even in cases where users do intend to come out to friends and family over the long term, not being out to family in the *short* term can create complications when it comes to claiming a gender label online. Users who

are out to *some* portions of their online network (but not to others) must remain constantly attuned to the potential for “context collapse” -- the possibility that multiple audiences may co-exist together within a particular platform space. To evade the complexities introduced by context collapse, many of my participants were vigilant about ensuring that their online profiles were disconnected from one another, creating new usernames or new email addresses for each space in which they were active:

Crystal (19, she/her): I just have a bunch of different email addresses, and I just make the accounts separately. I don't try to, uh, connect them, really ...[and] I don't post on Facebook; I just don't really post on Facebook, at all...[and] I do worry about [people finding my Tumblr]. Um, I worry about people on Xbox Live that -- uh, it's hard to explain, but I had, uh, a relationship with a group of friends on Xbox Live that, you know...that are all just, like -- like, all for being mean to other people online...and, uh, I have fun playing with them. But at certain points, I do try to, like, drift away from certain things that they try to do, and stuff like that...I'm afraid of them finding it, and then being, like, 'what the hell are you doing to yourself?' ...And then I'm afraid of them, like, finding out, and then, like, sending pictures to my parents, or whatever -- or sending pictures to my friends on Facebook, or whatever.

However, even when users take special care to avoid linking their profiles to one another, there's always the possibility that their profiles will be discovered spontaneously (by audiences both known and unknown). Those that are unwilling or unable to claim trans identity across *all* of their favored platforms are left with the choice of either strategically juggling their presentation of self across multiple profiles (which can be complex and anxiety provoking, just as it would be in real-time spaces), or not claiming gender at all and remaining unintelligible to others online (which often means remaining disconnected from online trans communities, as well).

What's Your Name, What's Your Story? The Centrality of Gendered *Accounts*

Finally, along with the focus on *labels* in virtual environments comes a corresponding focus on identity *narratives*. Demonstrating accountability to gender identity -- and to trans identity, in particular -- generally involves demonstrating a particular kind of narrative, documenting that one's identity has been *consistent*, *insistent*, and *persistent* (Meier & Harris, n.d.) over time. In analog contexts, producing the "right" kind of gender narrative means producing a narrative that accords with one's *embodied* presentation of gender (as, for example, Xan was told he had failed to do in his interaction with his therapist). In virtual contexts, however, decentralization of the body means that gender narratives *themselves* -- their pacing, placement, and contents -- take on a more central role in anchoring users' identity claims.

Other features of the digital environment help to affirm and retrench the significance of gender narratives. For one, while a full account of our identities and life experiences was once reserved for our closest (in-person) friends, many social media platforms render these kinds of accounts of self accessible to larger (and potentially unknown) audiences. Unless users regularly review their previously-posted content and cull postings that they no longer want others to see -- or, alternatively, change screen names and e-mail addresses and regularly "start fresh" with a new profile -- such accounts may also remain accessible for long periods of time. (Indeed, even in cases where users *do* attempt to remove their previously-posted content, they may find that others have collected screenshots or other supporting documentation, enabling it to persist and to spread in ways beyond their control.) The persistence of online content makes it possible for online audiences to efficiently access information about a user's identities and experiences, and to do so without the user's direct involvement (or even their knowledge). This changes the role that gender narratives play in helping to affirm (or discredit) a user's identity claims.

In addition, the digital environment makes a broad spectrum of information available that can be used to *infer* the veracity of a user's identity claims, even when such information doesn't involve the user directly. As Zappavigna (2014) has observed, the production of identity online is often *affiliative*, informed by things like network placement. A social media user's existing network connections -- they people they follow/friend, or are followed/friended by -- can be used as "evidence" to infer that user's identity or beliefs, as can information about that user's preferences or tastes. For example, participant Julian (19, he/him) discovered that his consumption of content by a problematic online personality -- in particular, Calvin Garrah, a transmedicalist YouTube star criticized for his disparaging remarks about non-binary people -- had been used to discredit him in an online argument by someone he had never met:

I was in this mild argument with someone [online] who was sort of being overly 'rah-rah' about some weird topic...I feel kind of embarrassed about it now, because I was sort of rude at the time. But...they were like, 'oh, you're a Calvin Garrah fan, aren't you?' [And] I was like, 'what? Really? Who is this?' I mean, I've watched him [on YouTube]...[and] I sort of get the comparison, because I do sound really mad [online] sometimes. But I do sort of feel like there's a stigma towards who you're subscribed to, and who you listen to, and who you watch.

The ongoing centrality of narrative in virtual spaces carries important implications for TNB+ social media users. Many worry about whether their narratives will be judged as sufficient to justify claiming the labels they're using. Identity-threatening interactions with other users have the potential to stimulate feelings of insufficiency and insecurity, and many participants expressed great apprehension about whether or not their identity claims would be treated as credible — in effect, whether they would be seen by others online as "trans enough" (Garrison 2018). For example, Cameron (22, they/them) said, "[I worried about being] able to claim the trans

thing...like, was I really trans at all? That was a thing for me...and having to explain [myself], obviously, it felt invalidating, and I felt very lonesome.” Presley (22, they/them) aired a similar frustration, saying, “There’s always those moments of doubt, where it’s like, ‘uh-oh, am I not enough? Am I not doing enough for them to see that this is who I am?’”

Users are highly motivated to defend themselves against this ongoing threat of identity challenge — not only as a means of preserving status and “saving face” with their online interlocutors, but also as a means of reaffirming their own identities and assuring themselves of their authenticity. Since *changing* one’s identity label -- which violates the “consistent” and “persistent” criteria for claiming trans identity outlined in the DSM (Meier & Harris, n.d.) -- might be perceived as discrediting, apprehension about the possibility of identity challenge can dissuade some trans and non-binary young people from directly stating their identities online altogether. As Bradley (18, he/they) explained:

...Even though I’ve had almost two years of -- two years since I started changing my pronouns, within those almost two years, I’ve changed so many things that if I posted something and came out, the certainty of that changing within a week or two would be guaranteed. Who I am this week may be different than who I am next week...when I started figuring out my name, I had told [it to] everyone, and then a week later, I said, ‘no, I don’t want that name anymore.’ So if I had posted online about that, everyone would know, and then a week later, I would have said, ‘no, never mind,’ and a lot of people wouldn’t take me seriously. I think if one day I’m 100%, and I know I will never change -- I find an identity that I find comfortable enough to not change through again, then I might. But at this point in my life, the uncertainty of where my identity is going to go, and the guaranteed factor that who I am is not going to be the same person I am next week, is not enough for me to make a post online.

Bradley’s reasoning here -- while sensible, given the features of the online context described -- holds important implications for our understanding of the online spaces that cater to trans and non-binary young people. For one, his reflection thoroughly undermines arguments that

have been advanced about digital environments as spaces of unrestrained exploration. And for another, it suggests that the prospect of having one's identity scrutinized online is enough to dissuade some young people from participating in trans spaces online altogether -- a finding that will be more fully contextualized and elaborated in the chapter to come.

Conclusion

Gender theorists have contended for decades (Holmes 2007) that divesting gender identity from the lived reality of the body holds the key to dismantling the gender order altogether, ending its stranglehold grip on our lives and livelihoods once and for all. The participants surveyed here, however, suggest a competing conclusion: namely, that even in the comparative absence of the body, gender categories and gender categorization continue to persist, even among those who are critical of the gender order and who actively seek its dismantling. Although many of the visual cues used to attribute sex and gender identity in offline spaces are attenuated online, users remain no less accountable for their gender presentation in virtual spaces. Indeed, when it comes to gender, these interviews suggest that *narrative* accounts may come to take on an even greater salience in this relative absence of the body. Decentralization of the body privileges the identity claims made in users' *narrative* accounts over other types of "evidence," and makes the stakes of these claims higher. These pressures influence participants' perceptions of the legitimacy of their own identity claims, shaping users' decision-making about identity disclosure and presentation of self. As we continue to explore the role that these virtual technologies stand to play in the reordering of our gendered universe, it is critical for us to retain a sense of skepticism about the Internet as "identity playground" (Turkle 1995), and to acknowledge that — while these spaces may, indeed, provide new possibilities — this potential should not be considered unbounded.

This project also contributes to our understanding of how digital technologies are working to shape the day-to-day social experience of TNB+ young people. LGBTQ+ young adults — and trans and gender non-conforming young people in particular (James et al 2016) — are a population disproportionately vulnerable to depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicidal ideation, and disorders of body image (Roberts et al 2021; Valente et al 2020; Lefevor et al 2019; Connolly et al 2016; James et al 2016). Trans and non-binary young people also spend disproportionate amounts of time online relative to others in their age cohort -- as much as 5-7 hours per day of active use, on average (Palmer et al 2013) -- signaling that online spaces play a critical part in organizing TNB+ young people's social lives. Understanding the role that such spaces may play in precipitating negative outcomes like anxiety, depression, or poor self-esteem — for example, by heightening users' insecurity about the validity of their identity claims — will help parents and other support figures to more effectively intervene around the needs of young people who struggle with these issues. In addition, this research helps us to make sense of the ways in which the structure and affordances of different social media platforms may contribute to the risk of identity challenge that users face more generally (as well as the form that these challenges take). As the Internet continues to be regarded as a sanctuary for many marginalized identity groups (LGBTQ+ youth included), it is crucial for us to determine the conditions that make some online spaces more (or less) likely to deliver upon that promise than others.

CHAPTER 6: “HEAVEN,” “HELL,” OR JUST “THE WILD WEST?” IDENTITY PROLIFERATION AND IDENTITY CHALLENGE IN TRANS TUMBLR’S NETWORKED PUBLIC

In recent years, the micro-blogging platform Tumblr has been characterized as playing a central role in organizing the identity projects of many TNB+ youth. In fact, earlier this year -- and subsequent to years of much-trumpeted news regarding Tumblr’s rising irrelevance and impending demise (Feldman 2018; Graham 2018; Kristian 2018; Swisher 2019; Brown 2019; Nguyen 2021) -- Tumblr executives took to Twitter to pronounce Tumblr “the queerest place on the Internet” (Cohen 2021). Much-beloved (and also highly contentious), the site has been enshrined as a “cultural institution” (Richard 2018) among queer and TNB+ teens: a place that has “normalized queerness and social justice” (Sarappo 2018) and that “takes pride in being a home for LGBTQ people” (Strapagiel 2021). In particular, the platform has been credited with giving trans and non-binary teens and young adults a space to thrive. As Emma Madden recently wrote for *Nylon* magazine:

If you came out as nonbinary in the 2010s, some meathead probably told you that ‘you spend too much time on Tumblr.’ If this offended you, you’d likely be called a ‘snowflake,’ ‘Tumblrina’...or something even more unpleasant. Your newfound sense of self would have been derided as some internet-created phenomenon you, and other young people like you, were using to get attention. But if you could have shown these Chads the state of the world at the end of the 2010s, they would have eaten their words. While Tumblr was responsible for the creation of a variety of neo-identities, today, non-binary genders have been legitimized on legal, bureaucratic, and fashionable levels, even in the face of ongoing discrimination...[and] there’s no doubt that the microblogging site helped facilitate nonbinary’s transition from an online, underground identity to a mainstream one with offline consequences. (Madden 2020)

As I first started to interview TNB+ youth about their experiences, I expected to hear positive things about Tumblr — and sure enough, many participants were quick to attest to the transformative role that Tumblr had played in their lives. When I introduced the topic of Tumblr in our first interview session, participant Cameron (22, they/them) broke into peals of laughter, crowing, “Tumblr *made me* trans!” Some, like River (23, they/them) and Kai (22, they/she/he), reported that their very *first* encounters with other trans and gender non-conforming people had taken place on Tumblr. Others remarked that Tumblr had granted them access to information and language that had finally enabled them to access (and to express) their “true selves.” As respondent Ramona (20, they/he) explained, ‘If it hadn’t been for [Tumblr], I wouldn’t have *known* I was trans.’”

As our time together went on, however, it became clearer to me that the “love” my respondents espoused for Tumblr was far from unequivocal. Indeed, most appeared to be deeply *ambivalent* about Tumblr, describing a kind of “love/hate” dynamic that they’d found difficult to reconcile: they appreciated some aspects of the space, but feared or denigrated others. As Avery (22, they/them) explained, “Tumblr is, like, anarchy...I feel like the utopia [thing] is more wishful thinking...it’s definitely a stated goal that I have seen a lot, but it is definitely *not* what happens in practice.” Brynn (22, they/she) hesitated a moment, collecting their thoughts, before tactfully explaining, “there’s a good community, and then there’s, uh, like -- there’s definitely, uh, an unhealthy section to Tumblr.” Ramona (20, they/he) was more candid, joking, “I call it the Hell Site...in terms of [my] mental health, I would say [that] Tumblr is definitely one of the most unsafe places for me. But in terms of my identity, it’s one of the safest.” Charlotte (21, she/they) said that “Tumblr is definitely -- in the spaces created by us, or for us -- very positive, but there is also a lot of toxicity and hostility too.” Participant Crystal (19, she/her), so put off by word of such “toxicity”

that she described herself as “afraid” of Tumblr, remarked, “to be honest, some people on Tumblr really fucking scare me.” Kai (22, they/she/he), also expressed anxiety about engaging on Tumblr, saying, “Tumblr’s very wild. Tumblr’s just the Wild West.”

That so many of my respondents seemed to have difficulty reconciling their mixed feelings about Tumblr was of interest to me. I was eager to learn more about the factors that had drawn them to Tumblr in the first place, and to explore how their feelings about the platform had changed over time. Why did so many of these dedicated Tumblr users also claim to “hate” or to “fear” it? What can their contradictory reactions teach us about the role of platform architecture in shaping community dynamics? In this chapter, I argue that while Tumblr has indeed played a fundamental role in shaping the identity projects of many TNB+ young people, the *same features* that TNB+ Tumblr users tend to cite as attractive and empowering *also* give rise to a climate on Tumblr where identity-based conflicts between TNB+ people pervade, impeding coalition-building between community members (and also introducing new risks to users’ self-confidence and mental health). Tumblr’s unique features and affordances -- in particular, its identity-based community building, its separation from existing social networks, its emphasis on labels as an arbiter of identity, and its unique post and tagging structures -- offer TNB+ young people valuable new tools for exploring and articulating identity, but they also contribute to shaping a climate of identity proliferation (and, subsequently, identity *challenge*) on Tumblr that can end up dissuading users from full participation. In addition, I argue that these dynamics have contributed to the formation (and persistence) of various negative *stereotypes* of Tumblr users -- stereotypes which can discourage would-be users from engaging altogether.

Tumblr as “Heaven,” or Tumblr as “Hell?”

Social media platforms offer LGBTQ+ young people (and TNB+ youth in particular) a variety of unique tools for exploring identity, representing the self, and forging community. Among the users in my sample, no platform seemed to play a greater role in facilitating these processes than Tumblr. Interestingly, Tumblr itself can hardly be considered a “social network” — users can’t access a roster of one another’s “friends” or “followers,” and don’t create individual profile pages. Instead, Tumblr largely functions as a living archive (partially a space for short-form blogging, and partially a repository for the curation of digital artifacts). The site allows users to post short written work, photos, and audio and video clips, either publicly or with a user-selected network of peers. It also affords the possibility of what users call “re-blogging” — the recirculation (and amplification) of pieces of content generated by other users, or discovered elsewhere online. Some Tumblr users reblog almost exclusively, as a way of keeping a virtual scrapbook of their interests or of passing along useful information to particular groups of allies — other Harry Potter fans, or other cancer survivors, or other trans people. Other users compile a bricolage of their own original content, composed both of content that they’ve “remixed” or adapted from other users, and pieces that are recirculated “as-is.” Part support group, part commonplace book, and part personal diary, Tumblr helps to connect young TNB+ people with other trans and non-binary users, while also affording them the option to retain their *privacy*, exploring content and experimenting with presentation of self in a space secure from (known) others’ prying eyes.

For these reasons (and others), Tumblr has been characterized in the existing literature as a “powerful site of identity formation” for youth, and for LGBTQ+ youth in particular. In a recent review of Tumblr’s rise to prominence, media scholars Fink and Miller (2014) have argued that the last decade has ushered in a “trans Tumblr renaissance” — an interval of time where trans and

gender non-conforming users seemed to flock *en masse* to Tumblr, and constructed a quasi-utopian community space there (affirming not only of TNB+ people, but also of intersex people, asexual people (Renninger 2015), and other marginalized groups). This characterization of Tumblr as a trans-affirming space is so pervasive and widely recognized that some scholars have argued for Tumblr's labeling as a fundamentally "trans technology" — a platform that actively "support[s] trans experiences by enabling users...to embody (in a digital space) identities that would eventually become material," and which "enable[s] non-normative, fluid, non-linear, and multiple identity presentations, making it queer" (Haimson et al 2021).

Tumblr's unique features and affordances -- described by Jacobsen et al (2021) as "world-building capacities" -- have led it to be characterized in the existing literature as a quintessentially "queer" space: one that Cavalcante (2019) argues that Tumblr "simultaneously generates the specter of a 'queer utopia' (Munoz 2009) -- a space where queer potential flourishes, where new more expansive ways to think about the future materialize" (p. 1716). Researchers have framed Tumblr as a platform which facilitates identity exploration (Haimson et al 2021; Cavalcante 2019; Oakley 2016), the coining of new gender and sexual identity labels (Cover 2019; Schudson & van Anders 2019; Dame 2016; Oakley 2016), the rapid collation of information about queer and trans identities (Jacobsen et al 2021; Haimson et al 2021), and community building between and among queer and trans youth (Jenzen 2017; Byron et al 2019).

These various capacities have also led Tumblr to be enshrined in the literature as a type of "networked counterpublic" (Fink & Miller 2014; Renninger 2015; Jenzen 2017). "Counterpublics" are subaltern or niche social spheres, characterized by their resistance to predominating cultural value systems (Warner 2002). While counterpublic communication has the potential to serve as both a powerful and legitimating instrument of social change, communication between the

members of counterpublics is fragile, difficult to organize and maintain (Renninger 2015). Renninger (2015) has argued that spaces like Tumblr offer users a space to “work out” ideas related to identity and community, organizing in the service of social change. By making commentary on Tumblr posts trackable, de-incentivizing “trolling” or incendiary comments using structural tools, making it easy to identify the original source of a “re-blogged” item, and consolidating thematic discussions around publicly-recognizable “hashtags,” some have argued that Tumblr has established itself as a *protected* venue for such communication, making it a valuable platform for many members of marginalized communities.

In many ways, my participants’ descriptions of Tumblr resonated with this characterization. They agreed that the TNB+ people they knew tended to favor Tumblr as a place to socialize and to consume information related to TNB+ identities. As participant Ramona (20, they/he) described:

I felt like the first step for me, like, realizing, you know, [that I was trans], was ‘doing research’ and figuring out...like, ‘is this actually me?’ And then, I think, the second step was, like, ‘okay -- where do I find more people *like* me?’ And so I found some friends that I still have today, based on, you know, doing -- just, like, reaching out, searching for a community. And a lot of those -- almost 100% of those friendships...I’ve made those friends on Tumblr.

However, in spite of Tumblr’s established reputation as a haven for TNB+ youth, many of my participants reported that they were either reluctant to join Tumblr themselves (despite this praise), or that they had chosen to discontinue their usage in response to some negative outcomes they’d experienced on the site. While Tumblr was undoubtedly perceived by my participants as a space of potential and promise, Tumblr was *also* presented as a site of toxicity and conflict, where conflicts over participants’ usage of particular identity labels and challenges to users’ identity claims were daily (and inescapable) events. In addition, participants noted that the recent flurry of

press around Tumblr's utility as an organizing platform for LGBTQ+ people had given rise to a host of negative *stereotypes* regarding Tumblr users: stereotypes that my participants worried might serve to undermine the legitimacy of their own identity projects.

While the stereotypes referenced in these interviews were diverse, they can be distilled into three basic camps. First, some users noted that stereotypes of Tumblr users as “deviant” or “mentally ill” helped serve as a deterrent to participation. These participants referred to other stigmatized populations of users -- for example, furies -- known to congregate on Tumblr, and expressed their anxiety about how this overlap in usage patterns might shape public perceptions of TNB+ people (especially given Tumblr's rise to prominence as “the place where trans people hang out”). For instance, Kai (18, they/she/he) noted that the visibility of so-called “Otherkin” on Tumblr -- teens and young adults that describe themselves as “being” or feeling a kinship with animals, supernatural/spiritual entities, fictional characters, or inanimate objects -- had led members of some online spaces to conflate Otherkin with TNB+ people, or to treat them as one and the same:

...On Facebook, also -- like, in Facebook groups, they're [always], like, 'ohhh, that's a Tumblr snowflake idea.' 'We don't support those kinds of ideas,' or something like that. Like -- like, on Tumblr, 'Otherkin' people are kind of entwined with LGBT people. [People] feel like a lot of LGBT people *are* Otherkin -- like, when they're younger...I doubt it, but it really seems like that on Tumblr.

Participant Avery (21, they/he) pointed to the trend in some Tumblr fandom spaces of describing oneself as having “headmates” -- alternate “personalities” or voices that users might switch between in composing their content -- and expressed anxiety that others would conflate these kinds of “performances” with trans identity performances, thus delegitimizing them:

Do you know what “headmates” are?...There are people on Tumblr that claim that they have multiple different -- I don’t want to say “personalities,” because it’s not multiple personalities. It’s not dissociative identity disorder -- they *insist* that it’s not dissociative identity disorder. [But they say] that they have people “sharing space” in their head. Usually, it’s, like, Castiel from [the TV show] *Supernatural*, or fucking Marvel Loki, and whoever the hell else -- or their made up OC [original character] for something, “sharing their head,” typing out whatever for them sometimes -- certain posts, and stuff...and I’m, just, like, that -- that fucking erases [us].

Other participants were more attuned to stereotypes representing Tumblr users as attention-seeking “special snowflakes” -- users that adopt unusual or hyper-specific identity labels on Tumblr, ostensibly in an effort to make themselves seem “special” or as part of a social fad. (The contagion arguments of Littman (2018) are in many ways born out of these stereotypes.) Julian (19, he/him) joked, “some people that seem like they have more Tumblr personalities than anything, which used to be a joke...‘oh, they have a Tumblr personality. They’re from Tumblr.’” Cameron (22, they/them) acknowledged that -- in many of the same ways as choosing to label oneself “Otherkin” or describe one’s “headmates” -- adopting an unconventional gender identity label can seem (to some users) to call more “serious” gender identity projects (Stone 2013) into question:

...I feel like Tumblr was one of the first places that had an active online trans community. And I think a lot of people who didn’t know that interacted with the trans community at first blush, and we do this thing on Tumblr where we, like -- you know, we talk about our gender, and a lot of us are, like, really hyperbolic about it?...and [so] Tumblr was also a hotbed of, you know, what I call ‘vanity genders’...[outsiders] see this shit, and they’re like, ‘this person isn’t really trans. They are a ‘stargender!’” And, you know, that brings the trolls, and the trolls are like, ‘can you believe these millennial cucks going around calling themselves ‘stargender?’ How am I supposed to take that seriously? What do I tell my kids?’

Closely related to arguments presenting Tumblr users as deluded or attention-seeking are a third constellation of stereotypes framing Tumblr users as “SJWs” -- as “safe-space-needing-diaper-wearers” (Cameron, 22, they/them), obsessed with identity politics and arguments over which users are “valid.” Concerns surrounding the legitimacy of users’ identity claims are endemic on Tumblr (Jacobsen et al 2021), and these concerns have led Tumblr to be cast as a platform of antagonism and conflict. As Cosmo (25, it/they) described, in its experience, the “discourse” around identity politics and access to particular identity labels sometimes seemed so relentless or so demoralizing that they ultimately served to push users away from the site altogether:

I ended up moving away from Tumblr...because as wonderful as it was, as helpful as it was over the years, the whole, uh -- the whole sort of culture, the many subcultures, and the clashing communities...the toxic social habits -- I realized I had peaked on how much help I could get from the site, and it was starting to affect me negatively...there was pressure to be seen as ‘enough,’ especially with, um, how online, on Tumblr, the -- the truscum stuff started up, and it was, ‘well, if you -- if you don’t try hard enough to present as your gender, then you’re not valid.’”

While these reflections might seem in some ways to reflect “a tale of two Tumblrs” -- on the one hand, affirming and generative and rewarding, and on the other, soul-crushing and invalidating -- it is perhaps more accurate to say that they reflect two sides of the same coin. I argue in this chapter that the same features that have contributed to making Tumblr a ‘safe space’ to explore new identity labels have also contributed to shaping (A) a proliferation of *new* and *increasingly specific* neo-identity labels, and (B) a propensity for *identity policing* on Tumblr, both of which have worked to (C) shape the negative stereotypes of Tumblr that end up curtailing users’ participation, even when Tumblr might otherwise have served as a generative and productive resource for them. In the sections that follow, I examine four of the features that participants pointed to as making Tumblr a safe and particularly affirming platform for TNB+ people -- things

like Tumblr's identity-focused community building (compared to the 'bond-based' community building that anchors platforms like Facebook), its relative decentralization of the body, its separation from existing networks, and Tumblr's hashtagging and reblogging features – and assess the role that these features have played in shaping community-building dynamics on Tumblr, both for better and for worse.

Anonymity and Separation from Existing Networks

One feature that provides major support for the identity projects of TNB+ young people is Tumblr's *separation from existing networks*, both online and offline. While platforms like Facebook and Instagram are imbricated together as an effect of their shared ownership -- such that establishing friendships or indicating preferences on one platform will change the content and recommendations displayed on the other -- Tumblr stands largely alone. Instead of being able to identify users via their existing social connections or their institutional affiliations (e.g., displayed linkages to a workplace or university), the only "real-world" signifier that can be used to identify many Tumblr users is their e-mail address. Since Tumblr *also* affords users the opportunity to disable this search functionality (meaning that others cannot see the e-mail address connected to their account), many Tumblr users -- particularly those who create "throw-away" or temporary online e-mail accounts to host their profiles, adding an additional layer of protection -- are able to navigate Tumblr under conditions of relative anonymity, without fear of discovery by others known to them in their offline lives.

It's this relative disconnect from existing social media platforms that has helped to establish Tumblr as a kind of "counterpublic" (Renninger 2015; Warner 2002): a space for protected intra-community communication, and for the cultivation of group resistance. Cho

(2018), for instance, finds that queer youth of color in the United States favor Tumblr over Facebook to express their intimate feelings and personal politics, owing to Facebook’s design bias toward what Cho terms “default publicness.” Users testify that Tumblr offers a venue for expression and connection that circumvents what boyd (2010; see also Cho 2018) has critiqued as the “public by default setting” of more mainstream social media platforms. While Tumblr as a platform is not *fully* anonymous — and, in some ways, may be considered even less “private” than Facebook, which now offers a host of tools for segmenting one’s potential audience and screening out unwanted readers that Tumblr does not — many users in this sample suggested that they felt comfortable on Tumblr because of the degree of anonymity it offered. They often reported that family members and work colleagues were less likely to use Tumblr, making the space feel less vulnerable to them than Facebook or other platforms where connections to known others were predictable and expected. As Cameron (22, they/them) explained, “You don’t have to necessarily represent yourself in an ‘authentic’ way. You can, like...try things out. And, you know, you can go on Tumblr and make trans friends without your mom knowing.” Lee (25, they/them) echoed, “[Tumblr] was kind of, like, the more ‘private’ social media platform...it was just a good outlet for me to, like, post anything I wanted to, without, like, having people I know read it...it was kind of ‘underground.’ Like, I didn’t know anyone on there, and I could post all this stuff that, like, I didn’t actually want people to ‘know’ -- I just wanted to vent.”

While social media platforms are generally framed as a vehicle for connection and friendship-building, TNB+ users interviewed here affirmed that there are times when the promise of *isolation* can feel just as rewarding -- particularly for those users who would otherwise suffer under the weight of “context collapse” (boyd 2014), or for whom identity exposure presents significant liability. Participant Fern (22, they/them) described the disconnection Tumblr offered

as a source of relief, explaining, “I didn’t really hear back from people a lot [on Tumblr]...a lot of times, it felt like I was just kind of shouting into the void. [But] it honestly helped -- maybe that’s what I needed...I think it was more about, like, seeing other people’s posts [and stories] than about getting feedback on mine.” In this sense, Tumblr is powerful for TNB+ users not only in the sense that it affords community connection, but also in the sense that it affords space to be *alone* (Haimson et al 2021).

In addition -- and also unlike on Facebook -- the pseudonyms that Tumblr users choose to label their blogs can be changed repeatedly and at the users’ discretion, making it possible for users to engage others without constructing a tether to their “real-life” identities (and enabling them to rapidly re-brand in accordance with their changing interests, identity labels, or privacy needs).

Tumblr as Identity-Based SMS

Like many other platforms, Tumblr enables users to forge communities across great distances. But even more importantly, Tumblr is significant because it draws these users together into cohesive *identity groups*. While “bond-based” communities (like Facebook) draw users together into networks based on their existing social ties — and highlight content or recommend connections to other users *based* on those existing ties — “identity-based” communities like Tumblr draw users together into communities based around shared identities and interests (Resnick et al 2011). Users seek out new content primarily through keyword-based searches — a feature that encourages users to think carefully about the labels and descriptors most likely to yield a return. As users “like” or reblog others’ posts, Tumblr’s algorithm links the user to existing clusters of content tagged in similar ways, highlighting others that are likely to share their interests. Through the algorithm, users are able to visualize how their own self-presentations harmonize with (or, alternatively, seem to contradict) those of other users, helping them to make sense of whether

or not they “belong” to particular communities (Seko & Lewis 2018). In addition to making it easier for users to locate others who share their identities, this also helps those who are *uncertain* about their identities to access a diverse array of narratives and experiential accounts, which can then be used to guide and inform their identity exploration process.

Rather than organizing new connections and content recommendations predominantly around a user’s existing network ties -- as *bond-based* communities like Facebook do -- Tumblr recommends content and new connections based on a user’s expressed *interests*. For example, Tumblr might recommend new profiles to follow based on the types of content that a user regularly searches for, the hashtags they peruse (and deploy), or specific pieces of content that a user “likes” or re-blogs. This orientation toward shared identity and interests is one of the features that helps to make Tumblr such an excellent platform for the *circulation of information* about queer and trans identities. Participant Violet (22, she/her) enthused, “going through Tumblr [was] definitely, like, such a great way for me to learn about myself...[it’s], like, so very blatant [on my Tumblr] that I am gay, and I am a lesbian, and I am trans, and this is *my* space, and I’m *happy* about it, and I am *excited* about it. And definitely, that’s what Tumblr really was -- the best place for me to, like, learn about all that stuff.” Participant Parker (19, they/them) echoed this sentiment, explaining:

I think it’s because Tumblr was kind of accessible with this knowledge. People were, like, clearly posting [queer and trans stuff], accessible for anybody to look at. You didn’t have to go through, like, 20 million pages to find what, like, one word meant. You could just search it, and, like, ‘oh -- here’s a definition for pansexuality.’ Or ‘here’s some actual resources for people who are masculine, and need a binder.’ And -- and, you know, it’s open, and public. And clearly talking about it really brought that into the lens of people, and allowed people to really think about what their gender means to them, and what their sexuality means to them.

Tumblr's inherent "searchability" can prove particularly beneficial for members of marginalized populations, who might have difficulty accessing information about their identities using more generalized search tools. While web-crawling search engines like Google and Bing traverse broad swaths of the Internet in compiling their results (whereas Tumblr search results only include pages that fall within Tumblr's domain), more *diverse* search results aren't always an asset in the search for *targeted* information. Many participants disclosed how their initial efforts to search for information on trans identities turned up results that were less than desirable -- sometimes, even frightening. Charlotte, for instance, recalled her first efforts to learn about trans identities online as quite traumatic:

Charlotte (22, she/her): I ended up looking on my PSP, because it had a web browser -- my parents didn't really know about it, and I could delete the history. And so I was looking on there, and I searched 'guy turns into girl,' because that was really the only way I knew how to phrase it at the time. And I got some, like, anime stuff -- just, like, fetishizing, like, 'magical girl transformations'...or I got some stuff about prison-related things -- either experiments in prison, or, like, one of them was this person, like, who got sent to prison -- like, a men's prison -- and so they cut open their scrotum and, like, got -- dumped their testicles into the toilet, so then they could go to the woman's prison. And at the time, I thought, 'wow, that's really gross and perverted'...and that being, like, one of my primary frames of reference, and then also just, like, anime fetishizing stuff? I thought it was something to be really grossed out and ashamed of. And so that, kind of combined with all of the things that I had been just taught passively, through my parents and interactions with other people -- that kind of caused me to really repress a lot of the feelings that I had and stop exploring this identity, or my identity in general.

Turning to platforms like Tumblr for *targeted* information on trans identities can help to circumvent some of these risks. As participant Ramona (22, they/them) summarized: "Google is a fickle mistress, is pretty much how I could sum that up. Because you can get good information out of Google, but you have to really take a while...[and it sometimes] pops up with, like, fetish porn

sites...[so] to be talking about specifically trans stuff, you have to go into an established community, and try to make your way into that.”

Tumblr’s architecture makes it easy to identify and access these kinds of “established” communities -- even without disclosing one’s identity to the participants within. This focus on shared identity makes Tumblr a great space both to learn from other TNB+ people, and to curate repositories of information related to TNB+ identity (which might be difficult to access -- both for those that are closeted/surrounded by unsupportive figures that might detect their efforts to access such material, and for those in rural areas or other spaces where community resources are less likely to be provided). However, since connections on Tumblr are recommended on the basis of established interests and content preferences, *establishing interests and preferences* is key to making Tumblr an effective community-building tool. It’s here that Tumblr’s *post structure* -- the tools that it offers users to collate, consume, and recirculate information related to TNB+ identities -- takes on an instrumental role.

Hashtagging, Reblogging, and Post Structure

Another way in which Tumblr helps to afford trans community-building is by giving users tools to rapidly access and collate *information* about trans identity. Tumblr’s post structure, re-blog feature, and hashtagging features each play critical roles in helping to facilitate this access. Jacobsen and colleagues (2021) argue that these features augment one another to produce a climate facilitative of dialogue and debate -- discourses that can serve (at least in some capacity) to destabilize or to subvert “dominant” narratives of trans experience.

As noted in the section above, Tumblr’s organization differs from that of more “traditional” social media platforms, like Facebook. On Tumblr, users *curate streams of content* to share with

the world, composed of a bricolage of text, images, video clips, news links, and other found objects (both those that the user has created, and those borrowed, “remixed,” or re-blogged from other sources). On the whole, the activities that they participate in on Tumblr facilitate *creation*, more than they facilitate direct *connection* (Haimson et al 2021; Dame 2016). Tumblr blogs can be “followed” -- and subsequently accessed in full -- by anyone that encounters them, with no need for a pre-existing or mutually-acknowledged relationship (Jacobsen et al 2021). By “following” users that post and re-blog content related to TNB+ identities, users can access massive repositories of information without ever needing to approach the curators directly, or request their validation.

In addition to “lurking” and consuming information about TNB+ identities passively, Tumblr’s unique post structure enables users to participate in conversation and discourse around TNB+ identity without necessarily claiming a trans identity label themselves. One valuable tool for many TNB+ users is Tumblr’s “re-blog” feature, which enables users to amplify and spread content created by other users. Cavalcante (2019) has suggested that the “reblogging” function signals Tumblr is a space where sharing content that is not your own is accepted and expected; those who may not be comfortable expressing themselves with original content can still participate in community by amplifying and adding onto others’ contributions.

In addition, the fact that Tumblr privileges *posts* rather than *comments* in algorithmically organizing a user’s content feed can also help to make Tumblr feel “safer” than some other platforms. While comments that users add to posts can be seen and tracked, they are not displayed to audiences automatically (as on, for instance, Facebook). This additional layer of concealment helps to deter would-be trolls from frequenting Tumblr to “spam” users with homophobic and transphobic commentary; these comments ultimately reach fewer eyeballs (and, as such, incite less drama) than they do on platforms like Facebook, where exposure to comments (and amplification

based on users' engagement with inflammatory posts) render trolling more rewarding (Cavalcante 2019).

Of course, in order to identify and access repositories of TNB+ content effectively, users must first develop a sense of the *language* that group members use to describe and define themselves. It's here that Tumblr's hashtagging feature becomes especially important. Users that post under the tag #transsexual, for instance, may conceptualize their identities quite differently from users that post under tags like #transgender or #nonbinary. Honing one's sense of a group's favored slang terms can help to further narrow the field. (For example, transmasculine respondent Dov (23, they/them) reported using the hashtag #VitaminT to seek out blog posts from other users that were taking testosterone, enabling them to easily filter out posts from TNB+ people that were not taking hormones.) Tumblr tags help users to collate all of the posts related to a particular topic or group (observing at a glance not only the *themes* embedded within the content itself, but also the *genealogy* or the evolution of those themes over time -- see Jacobsen et al 2021).

In an analysis of tagging on Tumblr as a form of ontological practice, Dame (2016) explains that the act of tagging on Tumblr transcends simple "labeling" -- it is an act of *enmeshment* or embedding, helping to position pieces of content in relational context. As users tag things, they link their content and commentary to larger, collective narratives; as these tags are recycled, appropriated, and extended over time, each label comes to develop its own corpus of meanings and stereotypes (some of which then transfer to the users that deploy them). As Dame (2016) describes, "tagging" in this context is as much an act of self-declaration as it is a practice of information management: "[Users'] tags are their ontological stake: I am identifying myself and my self-narrative as trans, in order to be recognizable to you in this moment" (p. 31).

The stakes of these ontological claims are high -- and made *higher*, as an effect of Tumblr's architecture. As noted in the previous chapter, *decentralization of the body* in many online communities (including Tumblr) can center *labels* as a core arbiter of community access; thus, having one's identity claims *challenged* can prove devastating. It is to this issue that we next turn.

Decentralization of the Body

Like some other online communities (for example, Reddit), Tumblr's user interface also enables users to *decenter the physical body* in their interactions with others. As a consequence, users have a great deal of control over the information that others can access about their bodies: they can post visual content only selectively, choosing selfies or other images that emphasize desired attributes, or they can refrain from posting images altogether. Many TNB+ users find this decentralization of the body as an identity marker to be empowering (as described in Chapter 5). Yet, at the same time, de-centering the body as a cornerstone of TNB+ identity causes identity *labels* and narrative-based identity *claims* to assume center stage as the arbiters of gender attribution (and, as such, community access).

Knowledge of in-group language and norms can help to facilitate connection with other users (as discussed above), but it should be recognized that this knowledge also plays an important role in helping to bolster users' *own* identity claims. In order to manifest a credible social identity as a TNB+ person in these spaces, users must construct a credible *performance* of community membership, establishing their "ambient affiliation" (Zappavigna 2014) by sharing content from the profiles of other prominent users and by deploying hashtags specific to the group. By labeling one's own content with community-specific hashtags and metadata, users both reaffirm their *own* identity claims and increase the likelihood that their content will be discovered by others that *share*

those identities (Zappavigna 2014). Users must be acquainted with the language and descriptors that others use not only to help them identify others, but also to help them construct and convey their *own* identities (and to do so in socially-intelligible ways).

Identity Proliferation and Identity Challenge on Tumblr

As the preceding sections make clear, Tumblr serves a variety of important and useful functions for TNB+ young people, particularly with respect to information gathering and to self-definition. Tumblr is framed as a comparatively ‘safe space’ for identity exploration: it stands apart from many participants’ existing social networks, making it a relatively anonymous and protected space to experiment with new labels or with new forms of self-presentation. This is also (and perhaps obviously) what leads Tumblr to appeal to people that are considered ‘deviant’ in other ways -- for example, Otherkin and furies. Otherkin and furies DO in fact flock to Tumblr at disproportionate rates (at least, insofar as we’ve been able to discern – see Read 2012), but they do so for many of the same reasons that trans people do -- to evade public detection (and public shaming), to connect with like-minded others, and to express themselves. Tumblr allows these users -- and others that may be socially stigmatized -- to render themselves *visible* in ways that might be impossible in offline contexts (given others’ lack of familiarity with their identities, or the lack of visual signifiers available to connote them). While most would be inclined to overlook someone that identifies as “wolf-kin” or “star-kin” (i.e., someone that believes their internal experience to reflect that of a wolf or a star) on the street -- either reading them as a conventional human being (as an effect of their appearance) or as mentally ill (as an effect of whatever behaviors they might engage in -- for instance, howling or scratching -- to render their identities more visible)

-- platforms like Tumblr *center* these labels as core signifiers of identity, and places these labels at the center of the site's architecture and design.

As discussed in the previous chapter, decentralization of the body on platforms like Tumblr can also help to render labels a central focus of socializing. The centrality of labels in defining a user's identity claims means that labels take on a different (and significant) valence in digital contexts -- particularly anonymous or pseudonymous ones. While this focus on labels can be empowering for participants on some levels -- for instance, allowing them to be "seen" when they would otherwise go unrecognized, or allowing them to be read *intersectionally* instead of having their identities treated as monolithic -- it also contributes to shaping Tumblr's community dynamics, both for better and for worse. (In addition, I argue that the emphasis that users place on labels and label-related claims ultimately works to stoke stereotypes of Tumblr users as attention-seeking, delusional, and obsessed with the minutiae of identity politics: all stereotypes that can both abet negative public perceptions of TNB+ people, or discourage TNB+ people from participating in spaces like Tumblr altogether.

Because of Tumblr's disconnection from existing networks and its emphasis on labels as a core arbiter of identity, gender and sexual identity labels have proliferated on Tumblr in recent years. This phenomenon -- which Horncastle (2008) labels "concepto-lingual bloom" -- can only take root within contexts where "new" sex/gender labels and concepts can be both freely conceived *and* freely disseminated:

There is little potential for [identity terms] to be recast unless popular sexgender understandings become broadened by an influx of new sexgender language. We can call this a concepto-lingual bloom: a dissemination of accessible sexgender knowledge that will increase the richness of sexuality discourses...the language used [in these spaces] by sexgender radicals will use slang and everyday terminology to articulate their activities, without necessary deferral to heteronormative use. (p. 33)

Tumblr affords this kind of “bloom” by promoting the circulation of new sexuality and gender-focused discourses – only some of which, as an effect of Tumblr’s affordances, are recognizably tethered to analog modes of style or presentation. Thus, participants in my sample repeatedly highlighted Tumblr as an “incubator” for new identity labels, explaining how their participation in this space had helped to inform their perceptions of their own identities. Avery (22, they/them), for instance, described this exploration of labels as a core component of “Tumblr culture,” driven (again) by Tumblr’s separation from users’ existing support networks:

[Tumblr is] honestly where I’ve seen a lot of different identity terms ‘start.’ People will just create it, and it starts on Tumblr, because, again, it seems to be a place where people go to get away from, like, people they know in person. Uh, and so they feel safe just, like, starting terms there, and fucking with their identities there, ‘cause they kind of can...what we’ve actually been discussing, really, seems to be a lot of Tumblr culture.

Tumblr’s status as an incubator for new identity terms makes it a powerful resource for TNB+ youth. Some of the labels that users deploy on Tumblr are neologisms, coined from whole cloth: these labels can help bring a sense of cohesion to experiences participants didn’t have a name for (for instance, the perception that one is “Otherkin”), or can help to highlight intersectional subject positions that haven’t been fully elaborated within the context of the current sex/gender/sexuality system. For example, labels like “autigender” (coined by an autistic Tumblr user) or “schizogender” (for users with schizophrenia) help to capture the reality that many with mental health conditions that influence identity and perception find that these conditions also influence their experience of gender and/or sexuality.

There are also identity labels coined on Tumblr that work to prize apart or to challenge *elements* of the sex/gender/sexuality system by expanding or redefining labels which already

existed. For example, as participant Sebastian (20, they/them) explained, “I don’t think we’d have the word ‘pansexual’ if it weren’t for [Tumblr].” As Tumblr came to enhance the visibility of non-binary and genderqueer people, many users began to question whether the identity label “bisexual” was adequate to characterize the experiences of those who are attracted to non-binary persons (who, by definition, challenge the “bi”-prefix enshrined in the label itself). Expansion of the label “lesbian” to encompass those attracted to all non-men (as discussed previously in Chapter 3) represents another example of this kind of redefinition. Coinages like “gray-ace,” “demisexual,” or “genderflux” are all examples of labels that have emerged via of the *expansion* of existing labels, challenged by the gender binary or by the emergence of the split-attraction model (which differentiates sexual/erotic attraction from romantic attraction, and has given rise to an enormous number of labels characterizing different permutations of attraction to people of different genders (James 2020)). Whether Tumblr users are working to coin new concepts altogether (Schudson & van Anders 2019) or to carve out new space within old ones, research on Tumblr as a vehicle for identity formation has established that this definitional work can be empowering. Creating language to describe one’s identity can be transformative at the individual level (in terms of helping to capture and convey the nuances of individual experience), but it can also be transformative at the level of social *structure*, helping to subvert or expand the existing sex/gender/sexuality order.

At the same time, however, the features of Tumblr that have created the conditions necessary for identity *proliferation* on Tumblr have also helped to lay a foundation for rampant (and sometimes deeply problematic) identity *challenge*. Participants in this sample described Tumblr as a space where challenges surrounding users’ use of language or the validity of their identity claims were a daily occurrence. As Sophia (23, she/her) described:

You have people [on Tumblr] who are, like, grabbing at non-issues to make them issues. It's, uh – you know, I'm gonna sound like a fucking reactionary when I say this, and I – I don't mean to, but it's like everybody got obsessed with the minutiae of identity politics, and forgot about general class consciousness – as well as, like, a class of, like, trans women and trans people, like, dealing with the shithole of the world together, and, like, decided to start fighting with people constantly. That's what it feels like.

In itself, the finding that conflict over identity labels prevails on Tumblr is unsurprising: these kinds of identity challenges are common to many identity-based social movements, as members struggle to define community boundaries (Gamson 1995) and to jockey for access to social and material resources. Collective identity is a relational project, effected through the dynamics of collective *action* and agitation for change (Gamson 1995); as Tumblr serves as a crucible for the foundation of new identity terms (and for the deconstruction of older ones), it is logical that bounding these labels and defining their usage would be a central community concern. Many of the conflicts that participants in this sample pointed to as anchors of Tumblr community “discourse” are repackagings of longer-standing tensions threaded through LGBTQ history. For example, one issue that participants raised repeatedly as a central concern for those moving through TNB+ spaces on Tumblr was the question of who should be empowered to use the word “lesbian.” As Ramona (22, they/he) explained, “There's, like, a constant debate of, like, lesbians versus bi women, which is just exhausting in its own right.” Jayde (24, she/her) acknowledged this same tension, saying, “there's the whole, like, can bisexual women call themselves lesbian [thing]...like, [do] bisexual lesbians exist...[it feels] like, you know, [an] ‘is cereal a soup or a salad’ argument, and I think that's what makes it so powerful, is that, like, nobody can really answer it conclusively and, like, end it.” This concern over how to bound the term “lesbian,” of course, is an outgrowth of feminist organizing throughout the 1960s and '70s, and the debates that

prevailed in these spaces around bisexuality's challenge to lesbian separatist politics (Rust 1995). Another common debate was the question of whether people with ace-spectrum identities should be allowed to call themselves "queer" – an echo of debates surrounding whether "kinky"/BDSM-practicing heterosexuals should be allowed to claim marginalization (Savage 2019), or whether those that practice polyamory are queer (Barrett 2020). As participant Cameron (22, they/them) explained, the frustration these debates inspire online can be credited in part to their lengthy histories:

So, [one] modern-day [question] is, like, 'are ace people queer, or are ace people not queer?' Like, 'are we letting asexual people into the [community]?' And here's my take, okay: asexual people are *not* institutionally oppressed. But I know *no* straight ace people. I don't know *anybody* who's asexual who's not either, like, bi and aro[mantic], or, like, bi and asexual, or trans and asexual. And, like, why does it matter who we're letting in the gate or not? This bargaining chip that they've made up does not exist. Are ace people inherently queer? Not really – but who cares? And also, why are we being gatekeepers when we've been gatekept?

Perhaps the exemplar *par excellence* of these intra-community identity conflicts on Tumblr has been the 'truscum'-versus-'tucute' debates: discourse about whether (and to what extent) physiological dysphoria should be considered prerequisite to claiming trans identity. So-called 'truscum' or 'transmedicalists' – both terms originally coined on Tumblr (Wijnants 2013) – adhere to the position that dysphoria *defines* trans experience, and that those who claim trans identity in the absence of gender dysphoria confuse the symptoms of other mental illnesses (for example, body dysmorphic disorders -- or borderline personality disorder, which can trigger instability in a person's self-image or sense of self). Those on the 'tucute' side, however – so named because some genderqueer and non-binary people on Tumblr have joked that they're "too cute to be cis" (@cabinet-dude 2018) – advocate for a *redefinition* or *expansion* of the trans identity label to

include those that don't experience dysphoria (or, alternatively, only experience *social* dysphoria), or those that reject medical transition.

Tumblr has played a central role in facilitating the development and adoption of nonbinary, genderqueer, and genderfluid identities (Madden 2020; Oakley 2016). By helping to render nonbinary identities *visible* (through its promotion of labels as a core social signifier), Tumblr has helped not only to promote more widespread awareness (and adoption of) TNB+ identities, but also to promote challenges to the “dominant” narrative of trans experience (described in chapter 4). Because Tumblr has been instrumental in supporting the work of expanding these narratives, it's not surprising to see people *on* Tumblr *critiquing* these narratives; nor is it surprising to see members pushing back, given that resistance to the expansion of identity terms is a common side-effect of this kind of evolution. What's surprising is how *pervasive* these debates have become on Tumblr: how *frequently* identity challenges are issued, and how Tumblr's features and affordances help to precipitate these challenges (as well as targets' responses to them).

Participants suggested that debates surrounding this issue could, at times, feel all-consuming on Tumblr. As participant Cosmo (25, it/they) described, relentless identity challenges on Tumblr were a large part of what led him to abandon the platform:

I did experience, you know, positivity and learning from my community. But there was in-fighting in the community, and then there were, you know, trolls from outside the community. There was this whole thing that started up – I think in, like, 2015, 2016 – where, uh, ‘truscum’ or ‘transmeds’ started being a thing, and the whole big debate over ‘you absolutely have to have dysphoria to be trans,’ ‘non-binary people don't exist,’ all of that. And so I experienced a lot of hate, a lot of trolling, from this little essentialist, extremist group on Tumblr...it was a wild experience. [And so] I ended up moving away from Tumblr, like, almost two years ago; I started using it less and less.



Figure 6.1: The image above – composed by a Tumblr user since castigated as ‘truscum’ -- offers a memetic representation of the ‘truscum’/‘tucute’ debate. (Jacobsen et al 2021)

Again, these kinds of identity conflicts are part and parcel of movement within marginalized communities – that they would be *present* on Tumblr is not a surprise. (In fact, to the extent that these kinds of conflicts enable users to agitate for change, we might even consider them productive – see Risman 2018). However, I argue that the affordances of Tumblr as a platform have helped both to make these kinds of challenges more frequent, and to amplify their consequences for the users targeted. As discussed in Chapter 5, when the physical body is de-centered online as a core identifier, label-based identity claims take on a greater cultural salience. This has definitely proven to be the case on Tumblr. While Tumblr users are certainly *empowered*

to share multimedia content that represents their bodies (for instance, selfies), it isn't this type of content that Tumblr *centers* as defining users' identities in the space. *Labels*, instead, are given a central focus on users' profiles; users are encouraged to include their identity labels in biographical statements at the tops of their blogs, so that others can make sense of the positions informing their posts. Users on Tumblr are *known* by their labels – and for this reason, labels feel important to defend (perhaps more important than they do in analog activist spaces).

Because Tumblr is a space disconnected from many users' existing networks of friends and family, it may be easy for the uninvested to dismiss these kinds of intra-community identity challenges as irrelevant hair-splitting. Indeed, several of my own participants – frustrated by the frequency with which these kinds of debates seemed to arise online – derided these kinds of conflicts as culturally insignificant (as Sebastian (20, they/them) did):

...Like, there's a lot of, like, LGBT discourse that, like, can only occur on social media, right? Like...well, all of the bi/pan discourse, and, like, whether or not, like -- I don't think we'd have people identifying as pan if it weren't for the Internet....[or] all the asexuality stuff. Like, all of the ways we talk about -- I'm trying to think of the most -- oh, *here's* the argument that's the -- the *worst* one is 'can a trans man identify as a lesbian?' That's another one that I -- *who cares?* Like, *who cares?* Like, at the end of the day -- like, people are being murdered. Like, the state does not recognize non-binary people. The state often requires trans people to sterilize themselves -- *to sterilize themselves*, in order to be legally recognized. It is cost-prohibitive for most people to change their names. It is cost-prohibitive for most people to medically transition the way they want to. Like, *who cares* [about this]? But we have these conversations, and we engage *fully* in these *absurd* conversations that, like, will probably never have any practical application.

Within the context of Tumblr, however, these conversations carry *profound* implications. Interestingly, while Tumblr's separation from existing social networks might serve a protective function for users on the one hand (keeping the space restricted to TNB+ people alone), this separation also plays a role to play in *predisposing* users to identity challenges. When the "real"

identities of users are unknown, group members often develop a sense of paranoia about whether or not other users “really are” the people that they present themselves to be. Coupled with this tension is the fact that Tumblr draws users together around shared *identity labels* — a focus with the potential to intensify users’ attention to in-group and out-group boundaries. Perceiving “other” groups as threatening can intensify a user’s allegiance to their “in-group” (Hogg & Terry 2000), and in online spaces, “out-groups” and potential antagonists can seem numerous and difficult to fight. While being prominent and *visible* online can certainly heighten perceptions of an out-group as a threat, insidiously, a group’s perceived *invisibility* can too: when potential antagonists cannot be reliably counted, anxious users may tend to perceive many where there are in fact few, fearing unknown trolls and infiltrators that may be “lurking” in the void. Group members are also well aware that anonymity breeds violence — that, in the event that interlopers *should* make their way into the group, harassment and antagonism are likely to follow.

When identity challenges and conflicts over labels prevail, the emergent climate of surveillance demands users’ *hypervigilance*: it requires that users are diligent in evaluating others’ identity claims (and, thus, ensures that they *also* carefully self-monitor their own. As Sebastian (20, they/them) described:

Hypervigilance is about, like – it’s, like, a self-regulatory process. I think it’s because social media is terrible, in all the ways that it’s terrible – it’s sort of become, um, externalized, in, like, all social spaces. And it’s – it’s a terrible thing...hypervigilance is, like, ‘language is the most important thing.’ It’s not about intent. It’s not about meaning. It’s *just* about language...[and] just policing everybody, constantly...[but] I *would* say that, like, the main reason why I think words are so important in trans and queer spaces, and why people are often really hypervigilant, is because words are often, like, the only thing that trans people have...and so if you say that, ‘well, that can mean whatever you want it to mean,’ or ‘that doesn’t mean that,’ then – devastation, right? Complete loss. And I think a lot of people just don’t, like, feel secure in themselves enough to, like, not be terrified of losing their words.

Hypervigilance around label use helps to keep the community *closed* to outsiders (and, thus, “safer” for those that use it). By making it easy for platform users to *view* the label-based claims that users are making (and to see at a glance which of these claims appear inconsistent, or which seem to “stick out”), Tumblr’s post structure and tagging features also contribute to this process. Since labels are used online as a core arbiter of access to community space, policing these boundaries is important to keeping TNB+ spaces on Tumblr “safe.” In an analysis of Tumblr tagging praxis, Avery Dame (2016) asserts that by participating in content tagging, Tumblr users forge a “folksonomy” of terms that – while initially empowering – can ultimately serve to further reify language use and to incentivize boundary policing:

As the folksonomy settles into a stable, ontological organization through repeat use, the vocabulary options available to trans users are limited. Limited vocabulary ultimately prompts user debate over tag definition. Given the deep importance of ontological security to trans self-narrative, users react strongly to contestations over meaning. Without a structuring apparatus to maintain social norms, users implemented horizontal discipline to resolve the embedded uncertainty around tag definition. (Dame 2016, p.35)

By reviewing the content pool tagged with a particular label, Tumblr users develop a top-down perspective on how language in the community is being used (and mis-used), viewing at a glance how the discourse around a particular label has unfolded. When users are identified as possible targets for identity challenge, Tumblr’s ‘reblog’ feature can help to amplify the reach and the effects of these challenges. As participant Danny (24, he/him) argued, Tumblr’s reblog feature helps to mobilize others in the service of an identity challenge. Tumblr’s anonymity makes it easy for those mobilized to ‘pile on’ to these kinds of challenges, without fear of retribution:

I think, like, the -- the format of, like, Tumblr itself, like -- the, um, ability to reblog things, and to add stuff on. And the fact that, like, that is visible to everyone on those posts, so, like, anybody can see anyone that has pinned that on. Um, and I think that, and the ability

of, um, people to ask anonymous messages, and, like, stir shit up in that way, without having to reveal yourself, or whatever. Um, I think, like, both those things, like, contribute to that very much.

Thus, each of the core features highlighted in the preceding section as a source of *allure* and empowerment for TNB+ users *also* operates to produce a climate of intra-community harassment that can place some users at risk. These affordances operate *together* to heighten established users' investment in keeping the Tumblr community safe from interlopers. Anonymity motivates suspicion, and suspicion motivates attention to boundary-policing. The sense of hypervigilance this context engenders can lead users to surveil others and police their use of language (a process made simpler by Tumblr's tagging and reblog features). Established group members may attempt to defend the "sanctity" of the protected space by pushing back against newcomers, questioning their intentions in ways that can undercut some TNB+ users' access to the same spaces established to protect them.

The unfortunate consequence is that some of the users who would most directly benefit from a space to *learn* about trans identities are the users whose intentions are most heavily scrutinized. This can have a deleterious impact on users' self-esteem. Multiple participants reflected that bearing witness to these kinds of interactions on Tumblr had made them question their *own* right to access, or led them to doubt the legitimacy of their own identities. Many users in this sample worried that others would leverage their ignorance against them — that if they used the "wrong" labels to describe themselves, or demonstrated a lack of familiarity with TNB+ history or media, they would be shamed and outcast. Xan (20, he/they) explained, "As long as you don't upset anyone, or cross any boundaries, and you don't interact with anyone, Tumblr is a neat place to be. You can learn anything you want — just don't ask any questions. They'll probably lash out at you for not knowing in the first place." Several, like Presley (22, they/them) described worrying

about whether they were “trans enough” to deserve entry into trans spaces on Tumblr: “[People will send] me anonymous asks...things like ‘you’re not really trans,’ ‘you’re not really a non-binary person,’ ‘you’re trying too hard,’ ‘you’re not trying hard enough,’ ‘you’re not putting enough into it for it to be ‘real’ ...[So] there’s always those moments of doubt.”

Interestingly, my findings suggest that while identity proliferation has clearly worked to incentivize identity policing on Tumblr, the inverse may also hold true: via the dualistic action of Tumblr’s affordances, identity policing and identity challenges may also help to precipitate further identity proliferation. Identity challenges often occur when users attempt to “expand” the boundaries of existing labels – for example, when those who do not experience dysphoria label themselves as transgender, or when those who are attracted to men (whether cis or trans, and whether intermittently or consistently) self-describe as lesbian. In an effort to avoid accusations of appropriating an “unearned” identity label, some users choose to coin increasingly *specific* self-descriptors, recognizing that developing a name that encapsulates *their* experience alone may reduce the possibility of being scapegoated for claiming a label that isn’t “deserved.” As more people claim these kinds of “neo-identities” (Feraday 2018), anxiety about whether these labels are legitimate stimulates fresh rounds of identity challenge, and the cycle begins anew. In this way, while Tumblr’s architecture itself has contributed to the proliferation of identity labels, these data also suggest a *secondary mechanism* whereby cycles of identity challenge – themselves borne out of label proliferation and label expansion – ultimately serve to incentivize the coining of *new* neo-identities, contributing to *further* identity proliferation.

While the ongoing threat of identity challenge on Tumblr has helped to shape perceptions of the platform as hostile or conflict-ridden (potentially retrenching stereotypes of Tumblr users as “SJWs” or overly-invested in identity politics), ongoing proliferation of labels *also* helps to lend

credence to stereotypes of Tumblr users (this time, as delusional or attention-seeking) – and these stereotypes can serve to drive users away from the platform, too. Participant Kai (22, they/she/he), for example, explained that while they’d found Tumblr to be an affirming space early on in their coming-out process (and while Tumblr had been instrumental in helping them to discover the term “agender”), the *continued* proliferation of labels on Tumblr was one of the factors that had motivated them to stop using it. They feared that others – learning that Kai was, or had been, a Tumblr user – would question their identity as TNB+, or accuse them of “making it up”:

I've kind of moved away from Tumblr and the gender thing, because it's so confusing...I just feel like there's a lot of new identities -- like, every day, and I just can't keep up with it. And I'm not sure if they're, like, 'official,' or if people just made them up. And obviously, it's, like, okay if you made them up? But, like, [if people] don't know what they mean...it's just awkward.

While this chapter has worked to evidence the duality of Tumblr’s affordances (and the dual-role these affordances play in shaping community dynamics), comments like Kai’s also help to emphasize the duality of *identity proliferation and identity challenge themselves*. While both can be fundamentally empowering for TNB+ people – the former in helping users to self-define and to articulate their experiences to others, and the latter in helping to reinforce community boundaries and keep members safe – each of these things can also serve as a *detriment* to TNB+ community organizing. Which effect they yield depends on how these practices are *wielded* – an effect determined, as I have shown, by the architecture and organization of the spaces where users wield them.

Conclusion

Tumblr has been framed by users as an internally contradictory space, both fraught with risk and ripe with the potential for positive transformation. In this chapter, I have argued that spaces like Tumblr – in many cases, selected by TNB+ young people *because* of their unique architecture, and the things that these online communities do to help protect users’ privacy, enable connections with other trans people, and facilitate self-expression – are *also* spaces that can contribute to a greater propensity for identity challenge and identity policing. By making identity labels a prominent, visible arbiter of community access, spaces like Tumblr direct users’ attention to labels as a core signifier of identity (and help to motivate users to *protect* their labels). Fears that other users might question or challenge their identity claims can serve to reinforce TNB+ young people’s insecurity about their identities (ironically, motivating further self-doubt and self-policing). The unending conflict over labels both (A) contributes to users’ anxiety about whether they are “trans enough” to participate in trans spaces on Tumblr, and (B) contributes to stereotypes of Tumblr users as obsessed with identity politics, and of Tumblr itself as a hostile and toxic space (perceptions which, in turn, can help to drive people away from the platform before they’ve even had a chance to engage with it).

The findings discussed here also have implications for arguments on TNB+ online communities as facilitating “social contagion” (e.g., Littman 2018). Identity proliferation on Tumblr and the gradual expansion of the “trans” identity category to include individuals that do not experience dysphoria have both been cited by advocates of the contagion argument as evidence that social media users are adopting TNB+ identities to seek attention, or in an effort to follow social trends. Data presented here, however, suggest a competing argument. Identity proliferation is driven – at least, to some degree – by the architecture and affordances of Tumblr itself. As users

attempt to take advantage of the affordances these spaces offer (and, in turn, try to avoid the ongoing threat of identity challenge), they help to facilitate identity proliferation. This proliferation, in turn, helps to support stereotypes of Tumblr users as delusional or attention-seeking – stereotypes which then serve to further fuel anxiety about the possibility of identity challenge, starting the cycle anew. While additional research is needed to fully elaborate this mechanism, the existence of such a cycle seems to contraindicate claims of “contagion,” suggesting instead that transmission of identity labels within these online communities may be motivated by the organization of platforms themselves.

More research is needed to understand the dual role that the affordances described here (and others) play in shaping the intra-community dynamics of TNB+ spaces online. More research is also needed to explore the implications of identity proliferation itself -- an effect made *possible* by the affordances of spaces like Tumblr, but also responsible for contributing to the relentless toxicity that pervades them. That these debates about labels don't ‘mean anything’ in ‘the real world’ (as participant Sebastian described) doesn't lessen the urgency that users feel to participate in these debates. Debates about labels are unending, because the affordances of the platform itself continually call users' attention back to labels/language. Challenging others' use of labels helps not only to ‘screen’ against possible interlopers and keep ‘safe spaces’ safe, but also helps to reaffirm the challenger's own sense of in-group savvy and belonging. As I discuss in the next chapter, these same affordances and structures can then serve to amplify the *consequences* of this toxicity -- a phenomenon with implications both for participant mental health, and for the (more general) social and political mobilization of trans and non-binary people.

CHAPTER 7: “CANCEL CULTURE,” SOCIOTECHNICAL AFFORDANCES, AND ONLINE ACCOUNTABILITY PRAXIS

This chapter examines trans and non-binary young people’s experiences -- both real, and imagined -- of being “called out” or “cancelled” by other trans people in the course of their interactions online. While much hay has been made in the recent press of the rise of “cancel culture” (Brownlee 2021; Wallace-Wells 2021; Bennett 2020; Kornhaber 2020; Greenspan 2020; Dodgson 2020; Ross 2019; Henderson 2019; Hagi 2019), the social mechanisms involved in “cancellation” remain the subject of ongoing debate (as do the purported *impacts* of “cancellation” for those accused, which vary wildly from case to case and are keenly influenced by the status and resources of the target).

“Callouts” and “cancellations” themselves have long been part and parcel of participating in social justice communities -- as, for instance, the myriad controversies that unfolded in the conversation circles and “rap groups” of the 1960s can attest (Ross 2019). However, social media has amplified every facet of this process, making callouts appear both more visible and intense (in terms of the size of the audience, the virulence and credibility of the threats, etc.) and also more damaging for the accused (in terms of the intra-community longevity of their condemnation). When “cancellations” take place within the confines of a small identity-based community, and the target’s transgressions can be documented piecemeal in screenshots and passed rapidly from one group of observers to the next, the implications for those targeted can be severe. Moreover, such cancellations can prove threatening even to community members that aren’t targeted themselves:

the hyper-visibility of *existing* cancellations (and the scope of their fallout) can lead the prospect of cancellation to loom large in users' minds, in ways that often serve to inhibit community engagement and curtail access to community support.

In this chapter, I draw on my data to describe the mechanisms responsible for producing call-outs and cancellations, including (A) the circumstances under which my participants participated in calling out or cancelling other social media users, (B) their experiences with being called out or cancelled, (C) how the fear of it shaped their engagement with social media, and (D) the impacts of these processes upon them.

“It Just Kind of Happens”: The Inevitability of Anti-Trans Online Harassment

Readily-available Internet access has opened the door for the rise of cyberbullying and online harassment -- so ubiquitous now among young people that many regard such harassment as an unavoidable feature of day-to-day life. According to one recent Pew study, 41% of American young adults have themselves been the victims of online harassment, while 66% have witnessed other users being harassed or bullied online (Duggan 2017). As Web 2.0 technologies have themselves proliferated, so too have the forms of harassment these technologies have engendered. Once used to describe simple online name-calling or verbal harassment, the list of potential threats encompassed by the term “cyberbullying” has grown exponentially with the advent of Web 2.0, expanding to include such diverse phenomena as:

- (1) sending hurtful, cruel, and oftentimes intimidating messages (e.g., ‘flame mail’) designed to inflame, incite, or enrage;
- (2) sending...hate-inspired and oppressive harassment based on actual or perceived social identities...
- (3) stealing a person’s screen name and sending inflammatory messages under that screen name to others;
- (4) posting anonymous derogatory comments about a person on web journals (blogs) or on MySpace, Facebook, or other social networking sites;
- (5) creating derogatory and insensitive online polls, for example, to rate girls and boys as the ‘hottest,’ ‘ugliest’...or

‘wimpiest faggot’ in the school; (6) taking digital photos of others [e.g., in locker rooms]...and sending those pictures to others electronically or posting them on Internet websites...(7) creating websites with stories, cartoons, caricatures, pictures, or ‘jokes’ ridiculing or mocking others; (8) posting material about a person involving private, sensitive, or embarrassing information, for example, ‘outing’ a person’s sexual identity...(9) sending [repeated] intimidating or threatening messages...[or] cyberstalking; (10) causing grief...through intentional interruption and harassment [e.g., of online events or meetings]; or (11) performing other actions designed to isolate, segregate, and exclude a person from online communication technologies [including, potentially, “cancelling” that person or revoking their group membership]. (Cooper & Blumenfeld 2012, p. 154)

So pervasive is the problem of online harassment that many youth now perceive the problem as inescapable. For instance, Samoh and colleagues (2019) found that nearly half (45%) of adolescent youth in Thailand perceive cyberbullying as “a normal thing” (p. 242), “ordinary” (p. 245), and even “acceptable” (p. 247). The young people in their study reported that they were accustomed to the experience of being verbally harassed online (or even of having their photos appropriated and used to create fraudulent social media profiles), explaining that they did not consider this to be “troublesome behavior” (p. 246). Similarly, Young and Tully (2019) find in their analysis of interviews conducted with American youth that teens often “view cyberbullying as normal” (p. 856). Adolescents profiled in this sample expressed that “everyone is faced with [cyberbullying],” and asserted that they would not disclose situations where they faced (or witnessed) harassment online to parents or other authorities “unless the situation was so severe as to be life-threatening” (p. 869).

Queer and trans young people are disproportionately vulnerable to *all* forms of harassment (including those perpetrated online). Cooper and Blumenfeld (2012) found in their nationally-representative survey that more than 70% of American middle- and high-schoolers identifying as LGBTQ had been the victims of cyberbullying at some point in their lives. Among their

respondents, 39% of the students surveyed reported receiving angry, vulgar, or threatening messages online at least once per week, with 8% receiving such messages three times a week or more. 41% of students had been targeted online for their gender or sexual identity within the previous 30 days (Cooper & Blumenfeld 2012). Palmer and colleagues (2013) arrived at a similar figure in a survey of LGBTQ+ young people conducted for GLSEN, finding that 42% of respondents had been harassed online or via text within the past year (compared to only 15% of cis-het respondents). These statistics are striking, both in fact and in implication: extant literature has established that disproportionate victimization of LGBTQ+ young people online (Palmer et al 2013; Bauman & Baldasare 2015; Abreu & Kenny 2018) contributes to negative life outcomes in a variety of other domains, including consequences for both physical (McClain & Peebles 2016) and mental health (Hatchel et al 2021; Abreu & Kenny 2018; McConnell et al 2017) and for the development of peer support networks (Walker & DeVito 2020). LGBTQ+ young people are also less likely to *disclose* experiences of online harassment to parents or administrators, citing both fear of being outed (Hatchel et al 2021) and fear of having their access to technology curtailed or restricted (Abreu & Kenny 2018; Cooper & Blumenfeld 2012) as reasons to avoid disclosure. These findings speak both to the pervasive damage caused by online harassment, and to the reality that the *allure* of the Internet as a vehicle for connection transcends these risks for many LGBTQ+ youth.

Even more alarmingly, as discussed in Chapter 5, queer and trans young people are particularly likely to be victimized by the members of other “marginal” communities that are *themselves* more likely to congregate and interact online: members of the “alt-right,” neo-Nazis, “gender-critical” feminists and TERFs, and so on. The anonymous or pseudonymous communities that afford freedom of expression for trans and gender non-conforming young people hold a similar

attraction to those seeking freedom to express their racism, homophobia/transphobia, religious devotion, or conservative politics. Some of these communities are ideologically invested in maintaining the “traditional” gender order and/or in undermining trans rights, making the spaces where such groups gather uniquely treacherous for trans young people. Others -- like the anonymous, equal-opportunity trolls of 4Chan -- may hold no *specific* antipathy towards trans or gender non-conforming people, but still find TNB+ people to be convenient targets: the fact that trans and gender non-conforming people now gather in readily-identifiable groups online makes them easy to infiltrate and source content from. *Others’* antipathy toward trans people guarantees an audience for this content, which can be shared in other online fora for the public’s amusement.²⁶ Crusades against the “SJW” -- the “social justice warrior,” a derogatory neologism for social progressives²⁷ -- are endemic in these spaces (Colley & Moore 2021; Phelan 2019; Massanari & Chess 2018), and LGBTQ+ users may be framed by crusaders as “SJWs” (as, for instance, female video-game players and developers were targeted during the events of #Gamergate (Salter 2018; Massanari 2017)).²⁸

Because online harassment from users with anti-trans beliefs is known to be so pervasive, I expected to hear a lot from participants on this project about how they dealt with demands to account for their identities from TERFs, Proud Boys, and other antagonists that would seek to disparage and invalidate them online -- and, indeed, my participants *did* report this kind of

²⁶ KiwiFarms users in particular have been known to refer to TNB+ people -- among other groups, including overweight/obese people and Leftists -- as “lolcows,” due to their ability to be “milked for laughs.”

²⁷ The popular user-generated wiki “Urban Dictionary” defines “social justice warrior” as “a pejorative term for an individual who repeatedly and vehemently engages in arguments on social justice on the Internet, often in a shallow or not well-thought-out way, for the purpose of raising their own personal reputation” (Urban Dictionary 2011).

²⁸ #GamerGate was a systematic campaign of online harassment that unfolded in mid-2014, centered around the issue of sexism and anti-progressivism in video game culture. Supporters of this campaign claimed to be speaking out against what they perceived to be the increasing (and detrimental) influence of women, feminism, and “social justice” culture over the gaming industry. Prominent female developers and media figures were targeted online by #Gamergate proponents, doxxed en masse and flooded with rape and death threats. (Salter 2018).

harassment to be a prominent feature of their day-to-day engagement online. Ramona (20, they/he), for instance, was dismayed by the number of “Twitter trolls” that they were inundated with after joining Twitter, saying, “my block list is already sixty deep [on Twitter], and I joined a couple months ago...and [there are] tons more that are muted -- like, three times that, that are muted. So, it's -- it's a lot, like, it's -- I would say at least one or two people a week [that I block].” Avery (22, they/them), too, was frustrated by how challenging it had proven to distinguish legitimate content from possible troll content in their own perusal of social media: “Finding [content] is not that easy, especially in the communities I’m trying to find...like, I’m Norse pagan, which is a fucking problem, because if I try to go follow Norse pagan blogs, it’s like, ‘cool -- so, are you, like, actually inclusionist? Or are you just another fucking Nazi?’” Charlotte (21, she/they) summarized the situation by stating, “trans girls [get] a lot of harassment from, like, TERFs and stuff.....people [are just] like, ‘hmm, I don’t know -- I think I need to ruin this person’s day.’ It happens all the time.”

Yet for the most part, my participants seemed to be largely *untroubled* by the ubiquity of this harassment, treating the possibility of antagonism as the “price” of socializing openly as a trans person online. Many framed this kind of call-out as a non-event -- predictable, inevitable, and not worth describing (or even remembering) in detail. When I asked participant Lyric (19, they/them) whether they had taken any preventative measures to try to evade or defend themselves against this kind of harassment online, they explained, “Not really, honestly. It just kind of happens as it happens. I don’t think there’s anything you can really do. Some people are just vultures online, looking for corpses, and I don’t think there’s much you can do about it...it’s just kind of shitty.” Many described their efforts to *ignore* this kind of anti-trans trolling online, explaining that they recognized the perpetrators of such harassment as resistant to change, unlikely to be receptive to

debate, and thus unworthy of their efforts to intervene. As Milo (21, he/they) summarized, “I definitely feel I have less of a voice in cis-dominant spaces [online], which is fine, I guess...I don’t really care to engage myself in those areas, because it’s like, ‘I’m going to say something,’ and [then] some dude just ‘goes there,’ and says some dumb shit, and then it’s just going to be like -- it’s not worth the energy to engage, let alone report.” Ramona (20, they/he) was similarly fatalistic regarding efforts to convert or persuade transphobes, explaining:

So, um, when I was, uh, a baby gay, and a baby trans [person], I made the mistake -- as I think a lot of us do -- of trying to engage with, uh -- like, for example, like, TERFs, or homophobes. And I have grown up and learned that that literally never works, because that's the entire point of their argument, is that they will -- they can keep presenting things left and right, until you burn yourself out.

Some were so accustomed to harassment from the “gender-skeptical” -- the phrase participant Topher (22, he/him) chose to describe those with anti-trans politics -- online that they went *beyond* cultivating indifference, coming instead to treat these kinds of encounters as sport. Luca (18, he/him), for instance, described the sense of satisfaction that he derived from successfully “baiting” trolls into making identity-focused comments, so that he could more readily enlist moderators in ousting them:

Some people bring in identity into attacks, and then I’m like, ‘okay!’ Sometimes I like to draw out people into making identity-focused attacks, because then I can have them reported and perma-banned from the subreddit...one time, an incel was dissing me for being poly...[and] under the sub’s rules, calling people slurs was a protected thing. So I tried to piss him off even more. He called me a homophobic slur, and I got him reported and banned from the subreddit, because I just figured that’s the kind of person who’s going to be saying that kind of stuff if I keep engaging him in conversation.

As Lyric (19, they/them) acknowledged, being targeted for trans-focused harassment can even serve as a badge of honor in some trans spaces, as group members “trauma-bond” around their shared vulnerability to such harassment. Importantly, this bonding can also help to strengthen support ties among users, galvanizing them against the possibility of *future* identity-focused attacks:

Uh, I was put in a list one time [on Tumblr] -- I think this account's gone, so I couldn't access it, even if I wanted to. But it was, like, this TERF account, and they were -- they had a list of, like, a bunch of non-binary folks and anti-TERFs on a list, and they were like, 'don't follow these people, they suck.' And, uh, it ended up, uh -- I didn't get any shit from it, actually, which was fun. I actually *gained* followers from that. People were like, 'ooh -- this is some good solidarity, here.'

What seemed to hit my participants harder were “call[s] coming from ‘inside the house’” (as participant Marcel described them) -- that is, call-outs and identity challenges issued by *other trans people*. While I recognized the tremendous diversity present within TNB+ spaces -- as Chapter 3 attests -- and understood the potential for intra-community conflict that this diversity introduced, I was nevertheless taken aback by the frequency with which these challenges were described in interviews. Intra-community identity challenges, call-outs, and cancellations were (arguably) more ubiquitous in these conversations than were conflicts with “outsiders,” and they were (almost universally) described as more damaging. Just as described in the last chapter (on Tumblr), the structure and the affordances of the online context make call-outs and cancellations both (A) more likely and (B) potentially more harmful (in terms of the potential reach/audience involved, the persistence of evidence of the user’s wrongdoing online (perhaps indefinitely), and the high potential for bleed-over into other, less identity-focused domains of participants’ lives) than they would be in offline spaces.

Understanding Intra-Community Accountability Praxis: “Identity Challenges,” “Callouts,” “Cancellations,” and “Preemptive Rejections”

Online identity policing and boundary maintenance can take a variety of different forms. In order to make sense of participants’ perceptions of (and responses to) the harassment they face within trans spaces online, it is important to distinguish the different *types* of harassment that a user might encounter, and to understand how these forms intersect and overlap with one another.

One form of harassment that was commonly reported in these interviews -- and which has been addressed (to some extent) in other chapters, including chapters 5 and 6 -- is confrontations surrounding a particular user’s label choice, use of language, or identity claim. I refer to these types of encounters as **identity challenges**. Identity challenges occur when a person’s identity claim is questioned, refuted, or undermined by others. Most of us have been the recipients of an identity challenge at some point in our lives; the phenomenon of identity challenge is by no means specific to TNB+ communities, nor to the realm of social media. (For instance, being “carded” at the bar or asked to show proof of vaccination before traveling are examples of such “identity challenges” that many of us have faced.) However, within trans spaces online -- where labels themselves, as established in Chapter 5, are centered as a core locus of identity -- these types of challenges are both more prevalent and (potentially) more vicious. Users are highly invested in keeping these online spaces safe, and establishing that sense of security means keeping users that don’t belong in these protected spaces out.

As an outgrowth of the climate of surveillance discussed in the previous section, identity challenges are *excruciatingly* common online, leveled against trans and gender non-conforming users both by antagonistic cis-hets (e.g., TERFs) *and* by other trans people. Some such challenges are direct, meant to target the identity claims *of a particular user* (e.g., “Susan isn’t really a

lesbian”; “you don’t look trans to me”). Others are more general, intended to scapegoat people for adopting a particular identity label, or to imply that a particular label (or category of labels) should not exist (e.g., “demisexuality isn’t a thing”). Still others are meant to establish group boundaries and norms (e.g., “this is a space for trans MEN; if you are non-binary, you need to get out”). Regardless of their intended target, identity challenges serve to re-assert community boundaries, and to open a dialogue regarding the legitimacy of a particular user’s (or group’s) participation in a space.

Since these kinds of challenges are issued so frequently in trans spaces online, concerns about harassment or judgment from other social media users emerged as a theme in these interviews. Participants recounted a variety of situations in which they’d encountered criticism from others online with respect to their identity claims. Ramona (20, they/he), for example, recalled their sense of overwhelm at the level of harassment directed at non-binary users on Twitter, saying “I was honestly...debating deleting my Twitter for the first couple weeks that I had it up...because I have my pronouns, and then also the word ‘lesbian’ in my profile. And, um, people would @ me and try to engage with me...’cause I had ‘non-binary lesbian’ and then ‘they/he’ in my profile, and they — they hate that. They really fucking hate that.” Avery (22, they/them), who didn’t have any personal experience with this type of identity challenge, was nevertheless quick to affirm these experiences as common: “I see it everywhere in social media — like, people talking about the comments they get, where it’s like, ‘oh, you’re not this and that.’”

User Presley (22, they/them) echoed this sentiment, saying:

[Identity challenge] definitely happens. It definitely happens...most of those will come as anonymous asks, and, like, the only way to respond to them [on Tumblr] is publicly...just, like, ‘you’re not really trans,’ ‘you’re not really non-binary,’ ‘you’re not trying hard enough,’ ‘you’re not putting enough into it for it to be ‘real.’”

When a user's presence in a space is perceived as problematic, community members might seek recourse by **calling them out**. A callout is a *public* challenge to a person's inclusion in a group. Callouts can grow out of identity challenges, focusing on the legitimacy of a user's identity claims. They can also target a user's *behavior* in a space, particularly when such behavior is deemed to pose harm or danger to other group members. For instance, in one queer and trans-focused Facebook group that participant Rigby (23, he/they) frequented, call-outs surrounding group members' use of AAVE (African-American Vernacular English) were a near-daily event. Using slang terms coined in Black communities or derived from AAVE²⁹ -- such as "woke," "shook," "shade," "lewks," or "yaaaaas queen" -- as a non-Black person is verboten in this space, as is the use of "digital blackface" (e.g., a white person's deployment of reaction GIFs or emoji depicting people of color). Group members who engage in such practices are called out -- either by moderators, or by other group members -- and asked to demonstrate their accountability to group norms, both by posting a public apology and by leaving the "evidence" of their wrongdoing intact (for others in the group to review -- and, possibly, comment upon -- later). This request for accountability is at the "heart" of the callout, and sets it apart from more general identity challenges: a callout is a request not only for explanation, but also for a user to acknowledge their culpability, to extend a formal apology, and to pledge corrective action. In essence, the person who has their identity challenged is *questioned*, framed by existing group members as suspicious; the person who is called out is *rejected*, framed by existing members as "wrong" (and called to account publicly for their transgressions).

When the circumstances leading up to an identity challenge or a callout are particularly egregious, either has the potential to escalate to a **cancellation** -- a user's wholesale expulsion

²⁹ For a full list of the slang terms and practices that are monitored in Rigby's group, see here: (https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-pjVeRnB72aAYRVsCYSV0oWUMBexNn3Eknf_geLilvI/edit?usp=sharing).

from the community, generally followed by their public disparagement online (and by warnings to *other* group about the cancelled person). Cancellations are a burnt bridge, a method of last resort; they are implemented when a user's behavior is deemed to be either (A) so damaging or (B) so resistant to change that it is not sustainable to retain that person as a member the community (or, alternatively, not sustainable to *admit* them in the first place). When particular users are "cancelled," they are blacklisted: they are removed from the space altogether (permanently), and members that have borne witness to their bad behavior then spread the word throughout other groups (or even across other platforms), "warning" other community members not to admit the cancelled person, or to extend them an audience.

While "cancellations" do typically result in the cancelled person (or group) being physically expelled from the community, it is important to clarify that being "banned" or removed from a group is not a cancellation in its own right. Cancellation itself isn't *just* about expulsion; it involves both a person's *public removal* from the community, *and* that person's *subsequent disavowal*, in ways that (A) *circulate* throughout other online spaces that cater to trans and gender non-conforming people, and (B) *persist* over time. For example, participant Kai (22, they/she/he) had previously been part of a Facebook group for trans men and AFAB non-binary people where a team of binary-identified transmasculine people had effectively committed a coup, seizing control of the group's moderator functions and then banning non-binary people from the group en masse:

I was part of this one [Facebook group] that I really liked -- it was mostly trans men, but a lot of gender non-conforming [people] too. But then somebody, like, promoted somebody to mod, and then -- I don't understand how this works -- but somehow, they kicked out all the other mods? Like, from being a mod? And then they had the power to kick out other people, too, and so they kicked out the gender non-conforming mod that was [previously], like, the leader of the group, and then they kicked out all the other people they didn't like, I guess...[so] we made another group, where trans men and non-binary people were welcome, and it's a better group. And it's less drama, because I feel like most of the more

toxic masculinity kind of guys were left behind, and they can have their own little space now.

In the situation Kai describes, non-binary people were forcibly removed from a group -- but they were *not* “cancelled.” Even people who have a standing track record of bad behavior in a particular space -- and who have been “called out” for their behavior in the past -- can be “banned” from the group (or asked to leave it), without necessarily being cancelled outright. The two factors most integral to a person’s cancellation are (A) ensuring that word of the person’s bad behavior *spreads* through adjacent communities, and (B) maintaining the *persistence* of that word over time, ensuring that others who later search for the cancelled person or trawl through their online archives will be exposed to the news (and realize that the user causes others harm). Being “banned” or removed from a group is analogous in many ways to being fired from a job -- it may mean being asked to leave (or even being barred from future return), but doesn’t preclude the possibility of finding work in the future. Being “cancelled,” on the other hand, is more akin to being *burned* (as a secret agent might be -- or even, perhaps, a witch at the stake): it’s a means to ensure not only that the transgressor is “fired,” but that they can never work in this town again.

Of course, one can’t have their identity challenged *or* be called out/cancelled without first gaining *entry* to the community -- a task that can prove easier said than done, particularly for users that have had little previous exposure to TNB+ people. On Facebook, users have the option to create “closed” groups (which can only be accessed by successfully answering membership questions set by group moderators) or “secret” groups (which can only be accessed via invitation). While these additional security protocols *do* serve to empower moderators and give them tools that help to keep groups safe, they also create significant barriers to entry for TNB+ people who aren’t well-versed in community norms. The membership questions used to vet applicants into “closed”

groups, for instance, are generally highly specific, dependent upon intra-community knowledge or terminology that “outsiders” would find unfamiliar. One exceptionally common example is the entry question “Does being trans mean you have gender dysphoria?” Veterans of the “truscum”/“tucute” debate discussed in the previous chapter will likely recognize this question as a trap, meant to weed out “truscum” and others unsupportive of non-binary or non-dysphoric trans people; a gender-questioning teen, however, searching for information about transition for the first time, would miss this subtext and answer “yes,” resulting in their application being rejected.

Some entry questions -- particularly in groups with an *intersectional* focus, where members emphasize that the project of trans liberation is inextricable from the projects of anti-racist advocacy, anti-capitalist advocacy, liberating queer people and people with disabilities, re-framing sex work (and sex workers), and so on -- require even more specific knowledge. As participant Jayde (24, she/her) explained, “if [the question is], like, you know, ‘how many genders are there’ -- yeah, that's a good question, because it will root out the shitheads that put in ‘two’ or, you know, whatever. But then sometimes it'll be, like, you know, ‘why is North Korea the best country in Asia,’ or something, and...it's like -- 'okay, I'm out.’” Questions like “can bi women call themselves femme” or “is the split-attraction model³⁰ valid” can ultimately work to exclude allies -- particularly *new* allies -- as well as antagonists.

Even if a user manages to gain entry into a group, there is no guarantee of welcome. Many participants recounted experiences where they had tried to ask questions or to educate themselves on a particular issue, only to be shut down. Malachi (20, he/they), for example, recalled an experience from his adolescence where he had entered a Facebook support group for TNB+ people and asked “How do you know if you’re transgendered?” Rather than sharing their experiences,

³⁰ In brief, the “split-attraction model” is the idea that romantic and sexual attraction should be understood as separate entities, rather than presumed to go hand-in-hand (James 2020).

users had swarmed the comments section beneath his post to rebuke him for using the word “transgendered” (in lieu of the more appropriate “transgender,” which frames trans status as an adjective (something one *is*) rather than a verb (something one *does*)). They asserted that “Google is a thing,” and that Malachi should have taken greater responsibility for educating *himself*, rather than demanding the labor of others. Participant Avery (22, they/them) referred to this practice -- which I label **preemptive rejection** -- as a direct descendant of a trolling practice called “sea-lioning,” where people with trans-antagonistic views enter trans spaces and make bad-faith requests for “education” that are simply meant to annoy:

As far as I’m aware, that descended directly from right-wing assholes sea-lioning the hell out of everyone...”sea-lioning” is when somebody gets on a post and asks a seemingly genuine question, looking for more information on something. Usually, it’s also referred to as, like, ‘moving the goalposts.’ And, you know -- no matter how much information you give them, they’re gonna ask for [more] sources, and none of the literature you give them will ever be reputable enough. They’re gonna ask for more specific examples -- like, down to the date, time, whatever. No matter what you say, it’s never gonna be enough, and their entire goal is actually just to waste your time. So I feel like the ‘oh, just Google it’ is very much a defense mechanism from that. Like, ‘I no longer have the energy to deal with this -- I have done this for countless other people. I’m done’...The “Free Emotional Labor Club” [Facebook group] grew out of that sort of callout culture, where it’s, like -- ‘here’s a place where you can ask those questions, and we will hopefully teach you.’ But also, you get sea lions in there.

As Kai (22, they/she/he) summarized, preemptive rejection can ultimately dissuade new community members from participating in trans spaces online. Kai urged community moderators in TNB+ spaces to think carefully about the people *behind* the questions being asked, exercising greater discernment in distinguishing good-faith and bad-faith requests:

Like, the people who ask questions when they’re thirteen, and people tell them to fuck off -- like, I mean, cis guys don’t ask questions like that. You know? Like, cis guys who want to learn, like, could actually be allies -- [I think] you can tell when people are just asking stupid questions on purpose. I think also, maybe, some people DON’T know when people

are asking stupid questions on purpose, and they think they're, like, trolling them or something, and they're worried about looking bad.



Figure 7.1: The webcomic above depicts the origins of the term “sea-lioning.” (Malki 2014)

In addition to discouraging new community members from future participation (and, potentially, generating feelings of anger, rejection, or shame), telling TNB+ young people with legitimate questions to “Google” the answers for themselves can often create more problems than it solves. As participant Ramona (20, they/he) noted (and as discussed in the previous chapter), Google itself is seldom a reliable source of information about TNB+ identities:

I would say that especially from the people who say, like, you know, 'Google is free'...I think it's probably just because they've been in the community for a long, long time...[and] you forget that you were new once, I feel like, is part of it. But I feel like the other part is

that now, people just *assume* that because exposure about gender and sexuality is so much greater than it was when, when we were kids...that Google.com will just have all the answers, and it really *doesn't*. Because -- like we were talking about earlier, you can find stuff that is, like -- you can find, um, anti-trans studies, which will, a lot of times, sway really young trans kids into transmedicalism. Or you can find fetish content, sometimes, instead, and then confuse your actual gender identity for just, like, a sexual [thing]. It's...it's really difficult to navigate, and I feel like the -- the level of compassion, as a whole, has kind of gone down, especially on [social media].

By foreclosing access to the *curated* information on TNB+ identities that can be found in these online groups, this kind of preemptive rejection can serve not only to drive questioning users away from particular platforms or spaces, but also -- potentially -- to steer them away from identifying as trans or non-binary *at all*.

While participants in this sample affirmed that these kinds of boundary-policing conflicts were common (and, as many argued, *increasingly* common) features of the TNB+ spaces they frequented online, it is important to emphasize that *none* of these phenomena are novel. Identity challenges are endemic to identity-based movements of all kinds (Gamson 1995), and these kinds of challenges have prevailed in analog activist communities since time immemorial. The introduction of social media has not *created* these dynamics, so much as it has *amplified* them. In the section that follows, I elaborate some of the historical antecedents of these boundary-maintaining practices. Unless efforts to create “safe space” are balanced against efforts to create *welcoming* and *accessible* spaces for TNB+ youth, the desire to create secure and protected community spaces (both online and off) -- though noble -- can foster a climate that ultimately serves to *undermine* opportunities for coalition-building, rather than enhancing them.

The “New” Call-Out Culture? Call-Outs and Cancellations in Analog Spaces

Identity challenges, callouts and "cancellations" are not new practices -- each of these things has a long history in analog spaces (and in activist spaces/protected spaces for marginalized people, in particular). As discussed in the previous chapter, experiencing intra-community identity challenges has long been part and parcel of participating in activist spaces, or in other spaces where members of marginalized communities gather (Ross 2019; Stein 2010; Gamson 1995). These kinds of identity challenges serve to reinforce group norms, to enhance perceptions of in-group status and “belongingness” (at least among those issuing the challenges), and to affirm group boundaries (thus ensuring that the identity labels members are claiming retain their salience and power).

Like identity challenges, callouts and community expulsions have a long history in analog spaces. For instance, the boycott -- one of the longest-standing and most storied of such accountability practices -- might be seen as an early antecedent of brand-focused ‘callouts’ on social media. Just as in analog contexts, the labor of enacting this kind of accountability praxis in digital environments has, in many respects, fallen largely to those that are themselves marginalized (in particular, women of color). As Clark (2020) recounts in her recent (and incisive) analysis of the rise of so-called “cancel culture,” digital callouts and cancellations can be understood as products of Black counterpublics, now leveraging social media’s unique affordances to demand accountability and structural change in the same ways that they’ve been doing for hundreds of years. What makes the emergence of the digital callout unique, for Clark, is not the fact that such callouts exist (or have proliferated), but that digital environments have helped to make these accountability practices *more effective* (in particular, by compensating for some of the structurally-mediated “invisibility” and resource inequalities that have historically curbed their efficacy in analog contexts):

Earlier examples of discursive accountability practices, including ‘reading,’ dragging, calling out, [calling] in, and even canceling, are the creations of Black counterpublics that are conspicuously absent from the American public imaginary, which holds a lofty vision of newspaper op-ed pages, radio shows, town-hall meetings, and the like as forums of debate where a multiplicity of discursive publics are equally empowered to engage in debate and the free expression of ideas....cancelling’s analog antecedents -- blacklisting and boycotting -- are also mediated processes, though limited both in scope and effectiveness by factors of structural power, time, and access to resources...originally a practice of Black women ‘signifyin,’ [the online callout] has occasionally been mistaken for Twitter’s ‘mob mentality,’ but it is qualitatively different. It is often a critique of systemic inequality, rather than an attack against specific, individualistic transgressions (Brock 2020). As venture community management, the callout on social media platforms such as Twitter is a form of activism; feminized labor in the digital economy undertaken voluntarily to protect the particularly vulnerable in online spaces (Nakamura 2015). The use of broadcast-style social media platforms, such as Twitter and YouTube, allow marginalized groups to engage in networked framing, a process by which collective experiences of an offending party’s (or their proxy’s) unjust behavior is discussed, morally evaluated, and prescribed a remedy [through] the collective reasoning of culturally-aligned online crowds. (p. 89)

Lisa Nakamura (2015), too, presents the online accountability praxis of LGBTQ+ people and women of color as a form of “venture community management.” Without the efforts of volunteer community moderators, Twitter activists, and other marginalized people willing to commit (unpaid) labor to the cause, online communities cannot offer safety or security to the marginalized users that frequent them -- an unfortunate finding, given the frequency with which online communities are billed as havens for the marginalized, or presented as “safer” than off-line spaces. In addition, Nakamura notes that the interest generated by highly-publicized callouts or cancellations often serves to drive additional traffic (including new users) to these online platforms, lining the pockets of social media conglomerates while ultimately rendering conditions “on the ground” even *less* safe for the uncompensated “venture community managers” acting to draw new users in (another instance of the “racialized equity labor” typified in Lerma et al 2020):

A Twitter hashtag called #ThisTweetCalledMyBack, authored by a collective of woman of color social media activists, makes reference to the iconic woman of color anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* because it makes a similar claim: that the labor of educating white men and women about racism and sexism is difficult, valuable, and unappreciated. The fact that the labor occurs via Twitter and Tumblr doesn't detract from its value or difficulty, according to these authors, who write: 'we are your unwaged labor in our little corner of the Internet that feeds a movement. Hours of teach-ins, hashtags, Twitter chats, video chats, and phone calls to create a sustainable narrative and conversation around decolonization and antiblackness'...though the act of communicating with the public about racism, sexism, homophobia, and other social justice issues is unpaid, and often results in the poster being harassed, trolled, and threatened on these fora, [I] claim that this content adds traffic and value to these platforms by attracting readers and followers. The human labor required to make platforms fun, easy, and safe to use -- the provision of free advice, the documentation and dissemination of behavior and speech that creates unsafe conditions for specific groups, and the openness towards forming new relationships with strangers who want or need them -- has been treated in much the same way as reproductive labor, and therefore feminized, devalued, ultimately off-shored for pay, and borne by volunteers.

While Nakamura's commentary suggests that today's social media platforms have done as much to exploit marginalized users as they've done to uplift and to protect them, social media platforms *do* offer their users unique constellations of tools that can be used to amplify and publicize calls for accountability, making the stakes of such calls higher for the accused (and, as such, rendering these calls more effective). While, again, cancellations and callouts themselves are not *new*, they are newly *visible* to those that might stand to be targeted by them -- as, indeed, is the collective evidence of such targets' callout-worthy misdeeds (also newly transmissible via social media). Accordingly, the outcry against "cancel culture" has been spearheaded primarily by those with the most to lose -- those in positions of great power, who have leaned on their power to safeguard them against requests for accountability and used their power as a shield to commit social harm. In this sense, "cancel culture" -- such as it exists -- might be most effectively described as a *tool of the marginalized*, wielded against those in positions of power in an effort to reclaim

stripped agency and to assure the accused that their power alone will not protect them (Clark 2020; Ross 2019; Hagi 2019; Nakamura 2015).

Recognizing that social media has laid a foundation for the emergence and amplification of public calls for accountability, it's not surprising that social media users -- and, in particular, *marginalized* social media users -- are frequently involved in calling for the "cancellation" of others. This observation held true for my own participants, many of whom had participated in the "cancellation" of celebrities at various points in time. My participants expressed skepticism about the threat of "cancel culture" espoused by people like Harvey Weinstein (Hagi 2019) and Bill Cosby (Ho 2019), affirming these kinds of cancellations as a necessary cultural reckoning. Participant Charlotte (21, she/they), for example, summarized:

I think a lot of it has come from people being tired of the status quo -- people being tired of people forgiving things too easily...and it's just, like -- I totally understand that, because that stuff's -- all that stuff [sexual assaults; hate speech; etc.] is not stuff that should be happening any more, and it needs to stop. And so a lot of that kind of attitude [of], you know, 'this person is cancelled' or 'this thing is cancelled,' comes from 'I just don't want to deal with this particular issue any more, because this shouldn't be a thing any more.' And yeah -- I get that.

Xan (20, he/they), too, asserted that he believed digitally-mediated callouts and cancellations to be a valuable tool, saying, "like, [if] you made a semi-racist tweet or homophobic tweet when you were 14, you're gonna get dragged about it today...you say something mean to someone, out of anger, or rage, or whatever? You're gonna get called out for it. It definitely exists, and it's kind of scary -- but at the same time, it's refreshing to see people held accountable for their actions." For Xan, the looming threat of being targeted for one's own online misbehavior paled in

comparison to the benefits of being able to hold others -- particularly those that previously believed themselves impervious to accountability -- accountable for theirs.

Yet, while my participants understood (and even endorsed) the utility of callouts and cancellations, this understanding didn't make them less *fearful* of being targeted themselves. Their responses pointed not to one unified, monolithic "cancel culture," but to *two* unique forms of such a culture: an *inter-community* form, directed by marginalized people at wrongdoers in positions of power as a means of exacting retribution, and an *intra-community* form, directed *at* marginalized people (including TNB+ people) *by other marginalized people*. When my participants referenced their *own* experiences with online "cancel culture," they were seldom invoking the kinds of demands for accountability that have been levied at people like J.K. Rowling (Shead 2020) and Dave Chappelle (Deggans 2021). Far more often, they referred to smaller-scale dynamics, wherein marginalized or stigmatized users are taken to task (or, worse, fundamentally excommunicated) by members of their own primary support communities.

While markedly different -- both in form, and in function -- than recent call-outs of Hollywood moguls and NFL superstars, intra-community callouts and cancellations are *also* fundamentally requests for accountability. They are requests for people to correct their behavior, because they are causing distress -- intentional, or otherwise -- to others within the community. The problem, of course, comes in defining what it *means* to cause harm to community members. Most would consider hate speech (for instance, the use of racial or homophobic slurs) to be a clear source of harm -- but what about using *outdated* speech (for instance, the word "transsexual" in place of "transgender," or "hermaphrodite" in place of "intersex")? Has harm occurred if users invite well-meaning (but non-TNB+) friends or family members into protected community spaces? Has harm occurred if a user claims an identity label that seems inconsistent with their experience?

Must harm *have* occurred -- or (as in the case of some “preemptive rejections”) is the simple *threat* of harm enough? Who is responsible for assessing whether a particular wrongdoer can be redeemed?

As my participants noted, when socially stigmatized users gather together, callouts or cancellations are often over-utilized as tools for self-protection. These tactics may be perceived by group members as the only viable means to keep protected community spaces “safe.” The desire to protect these spaces from outside infiltration and to ensure that everyone’s access to the space is “legitimate” can contribute to a dynamic of intra-community surveillance that motivates identity policing. As Ramona (20, they/he) explained:

[It’s about] community engagement and safety...at the end of the day, people might -- it's possible that people writing call-out posts might genuinely believe that they're doing this so that they have tools to keep others safe. Sometimes that is the case -- sometimes there *are* genuinely dangerous people out there on the Internet...but we have such little agency and safety in our own lives, as gay and trans people, that I feel like a lot of times, we end up over-policing our own communities as a result.

In addition, the hypervigilance and fear precipitated by a climate of ongoing systemic violence against TNB+ people can lead some community members to react first and process their reactions later. Participant Aurora (23, she/her) reflected that “in the transgender community, whe[n] you’re so challenged all the time, it can lead to black-and-white thinking...they’re always on the defensive from society, at a larger level of cis people, so that can translate to the same reactions to trans folks.” While, again, these tensions have been known to run high in analog activist spaces too (Ross 2019), the digital context has altered the terms of these encounters. Confronting a community member about their behavior or their politics in an analog setting -- for instance, at a house party where other community members are present -- can certainly be devastating for community relationships; it can still stimulate side arguments between other

members of the group, lead to factionalization or taking sides, and damage the reputations of both the target and the accuser. Virtual environments, however, *intensify* these possibilities. They make it easier for users to share (and publicize) instantaneous reactions, and harder for users to walk such “snap judgments” back. They enable evidence of a user’s wrongdoing to *persist* in community space -- perhaps indefinitely -- and to be accessed by new community members on an ongoing basis (where, in analog community spaces, word of a person’s misdeeds -- even if not forgiven, or soon forgotten -- still inevitably erodes over time).

Thus, just as the long-term consequences of *inter-community* callouts (like the ones exemplified by the #MeToo movement) have been heightened by the features and affordances of social media, the potential sequelae of *intra-community* callouts and cancellations have been similarly amplified. Although amplification of the former has held positive implications for marginalized young people (including TNB+ youth), the amplification of the latter has been catastrophic. The desire to produce “safe space” couples with the affordances of today’s social media platforms to make many online communities for TNB+ young people -- intended as a source of support and affirmation -- spaces where intra-community callouts and cancellations prevail, rendering full engagement (particularly for new or questioning members) fundamentally *unsafe*.

Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger: How Digital Environments Shape Accountability Praxis

Once again, identity challenges and callouts and cancellations are hardly new inventions - - these are all antecedents of analog practices that have long prevailed in queer and trans spaces. What’s different about the virtual context is (A) how it enables these kinds of intra-community challenges to proliferate; (B) how it allows these challenges to *spread* and reach unexpected audiences; and (C) how it enhances the potential *consequences* of these types of challenges. In the

section that follows, I discuss three of the sociotechnical *affordances* -- anonymity, virality, and content persistence -- that have contributed to this amplification. I then assess the implications of these dynamics for community organizing (and participant well-being) in TNB+ spaces online.

Strength (and Weakness?) in Numbers

Online communities enable trans people to identify and communicate with one another across vast physical distances, forging community with users that they may never have the chance to meet in person. The fact that the online context facilitates these kinds of far-flung connections is one of the things that makes it such an asset to trans and gender non-conforming people. TNB+ people living in rural or socially conservative areas may have few opportunities to connect with other trans people locally, and online communities can help these users to escape (an otherwise profound) isolation.

At the same time, larger numbers of TNB+ people being present in a single (online) space increases the potential for intra-community conflict, just as an effect of numbers alone. As Kai (22, they/she/he) explained:

I think that the community is big enough now. Like, in the '90s, I feel like people would be more, like, 'ohh, you poor trans butterfly! Please, come into our net! We must increase our numbers!'...you know, and be more, like -- like, 'we need more people. We need more people around us,' [because] it's better to have more people, instead of just having, like, a dating pool of, like, two -- the same two lesbians that you've known your entire life. It's, like -- and now there are so many people [in the community] that you can afford to, like, tell people to fuck off, I guess.

In addition, larger communities *also* create a propensity for conflict by increasing the potential for "culture clash." Large online communities often have membership rosters that span not just the country, but much of the world; international users may have competing perspectives

on the meaning and significance of trans identities, or different views about what life as a trans person involves (or should involve). Cultural context can also work to shape users' perceptions of the *history* of trans identities, or on the imbrication of trans identities with other categories of identity (such as sexuality, ability, or race). More users in a space generally means exposure to a greater diversity of *labels* that might be used to describe participants' identities; as discussed in Chapter 6, this is another factor that can help to incentivize boundary-policing and identity challenges, as users grapple with the question of which of these labels should be considered "valid," culturally significant, or "real."

Virality

By introducing the potential for content to "go viral," social media platforms and online communities play a key role in enhancing the *reach* of identity challenges and call-outs, helping word of others' nefarious behavior to spread and reach new audiences. Virality is a central affordance of most of today's major social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr. The fact that these major platforms are themselves bound together further enhances the viral potential of the content they are used to share. (For example, on Instagram, users making a new post are invited to share their content simultaneously to Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr; thus, a call-out post drafted on Instagram can be broadcast across up to four major SNS instantaneously, with no more than a push of a button.)

However, platforms themselves offer a *range* of features and affordances, and the ways in which these constellations of features intersect and interact with one another can further enhance (or impede) the potential for virality. For example, Twitter's "re-tweet" feature -- which affords the ability to quickly copy and share tweets developed by other users -- was referenced by many participants as an attribute that helps to increase the reach of (and, thus, the audience for) particular

posts. Jayde (24, she/her), for instance, explained that re-tweeting a call-out can lead targeted users to crash and burn almost immediately: “From what I’ve observed on Twitter...it’s way worse than Facebook, because there’s no -- like, if you fuck up, you’re going down, like, way quicker and way harder...and it will be, like, non-stop, [based on] the number of followers a person has...and the character of the people watching.” Violet (21, she/her) agreed, adding that the ability to follow particular *hashtags* on Twitter contributes to this potential, allowing users to “monitor” content related to particular debates or discourses (and to descend upon the posters responsible immediately, as such content arrives):

And it's just, like -- it feels like things on Twitter get around so much faster...especially things where people re-[tweet] things, and then people, like, start fighting. [That] is because people, like, actively monitor some specific things on Twitter, and when something happens, they are very, very, very, very aggressive about it. So definitely, Twitter is the most aggressive, and rude, and worst place, I feel like, in terms of any of these gender or trans issues, because people love policing them, and love making people feel bad about them....Twitter is such a cesspool of hate, and of sadness. Like, Twitter -- like, I see, like, people actually legitimately ask, like -- demanding death threats, and, like, using slurs, and just being overall, like, horrible people. And it's like -- that's, like -- it's just horrible. And it's, like, I don't want that around me.

Like Twitter, the micro-blogging platform Tumblr also enables users to “re-blog” content produced by other users. However, *unlike* Twitter, Tumblr enforces no character limit upon the content users generate, allowing users to append (sometimes lengthy) reflections to the pieces they re-blog. While Twitter users can *also* add text to the tweets they re-tweet, the Twitter character limit keeps these additions short. Twitter users can, of course, create their *own* subsequent string of tweets to debrief or add context to something they’ve re-tweeted, but these contributions won’t then *follow* the original re-tweet as it continues to make its way around the Web (unless the context-granting new tweets are themselves re-tweeted). On Tumblr, however, users are free to

add as much new commentary as they want to a re-blogged post -- and, moreover, this content will then *itself* re-circulate, as additional users re-blog and engage with the added commentary.³¹ As

Ramona (20, they/he) explained:

Tumblr's ability to make things go viral is almost unprecedented, and I think that's why callout culture worked so well there. Because it's, like, you re -- you can read, like, you can read a post about how, like, X is a horrible and awful person and you should stay away from them at all costs, and then at the end of the post, it's like, 're-blog to spread awareness.' And so then, all of a sudden, that post will have, like, thousands and thousands of interactions and notes and comments on it, and that's why it's so dangerous -- because of its ability to make things spread.

Viral dissemination of content is even more efficient in contexts where users are already richly interconnected. This is another domain where efforts to establish protected space can work against trans and gender non-conforming users. The desire to build digital enclaves with other TNB+ people -- an understandable desire, given the cultural climate both in off-line contexts and elsewhere online -- can couple with the fact that trans and non-binary people are few in number (James et al 2016) to give rise to a "small town" interpersonal dynamic where everyone seems to know everyone else, as participant Crystal (19, she/her) explained:

It seems like a lot of us, like -- that a lot of us, like, know each other a bit. Like, I can talk to someone on Facebook Messenger, and, like, if -- if we are, like, interacting a lot, I can end up being, like -- mentioning names, and they'll be like, 'oh yeah, I know her,' or whatever....it's all, like, interconnected.

³¹ The Wikipedia article on reblogging (as of October 31, 2021) explains that "[Tumblr] is profile-driven and hierarchical in its facilitation of 'reblogs.' An original post by one Tumblr user is reblogged by another user by embedding a quote of the original post, link, and publishing username in the repost, with the option of making a comment in reply to the previous post. A feature of this method that distinguishes Tumblr from Twitter is that less emphasis is placed upon reblogging only the original post, resulting in often highly-stacked semi-threaded conversations which are indexed and interpreted by the Tumblr server in the presented manner....allow[ing] for an endless amount of interpretations of the subject matter. As a result, posts to Tumblr are typically shown less as typical blog posts...and more as a blend of both Internet forum and blog features." (Wikipedia 2021)

The dense interconnectivity that Crystal describes is, again, part and parcel of what makes these spaces useful as support resources for trans and gender non-conforming people. These connections help (at least in some ways) to compensate for the isolation and lack of support that many TNB+ people confront in other domains of life. But at the same time, “everyone knowing everyone” can make it easier for news of identity challenges, callouts, and cancellations to circulate throughout the community at large. The more connected young TNB+ people are to one another, and the more content they share amongst themselves, the more vulnerable they become should intra-community conflict arise. As Brynn (22, they/she) observed, this interconnectedness can also enhance the *intensity* of callouts or identity challenges, as people of influence can readily mobilize their followers to spread word of a conflict (and those followers -- having already established their allegiance to the person of influence -- often issue an impassioned response, whether to curry greater favor with their leader or to defend them against the perceived threat):

I mean, basically...one person would say something to set off a cascade of others who -- regardless of truth or fiction, the moment that that, you know, person of influence said something -- [decided] that had to be true, and everything just followed after. And after the fact, it was very hard to tell whether or not it *had* been true, because there was so much, like -- the waters were so agitated, you couldn't see. And, like, once the dust settled, there wasn't enough left of any of the ones, like, closely involved to put anything together. It's, like -- I'd see people who, like, they said something, but then their friends -- even if, like, they only sent, like, a message of support directly to that person, or, like, tagged them on a post, they would get drawn in, and it was just a mess.

Another consequence of virality is that callouts and cancellations become *more visible* to users -- even users that aren't directly involved -- than they would be in offline contexts. Thus, while callouts and cancellations themselves may in fact be few in number, the online context can make it *appear* as though these events are very frequent (as the same screenshots and conversations are often re-blogged across multiple platforms, drawing users' attention over and over again. As

Avery (22, they/them) summarized, “it’s not even that I necessarily have, like, personal experiences with people calling me out -- it’s more that I, like, see people calling *each other* out, and go, ‘oh God, I want no part of that.’ Um, I am deeply afraid. That’s just a stress level that I don’t need.” Cameron (22, they/them) was even more explicit about the impacts of this increased visibility, explaining how repeated exposure to these kinds of callouts had led them to develop a vicious “internal critic”:

I think I constructed an outside critic, based on what was available to me -- my own availability heuristic of what I *thought* people were saying about trans people...I think what happened was I amalgamated all the shit that trolls were *actually* saying, [and] I amalgamated the *intensity* of what was actually being said, intra-community-wise, in the trans community, about being ‘trans enough,’ and I amalgamated those, and [it] amplified my own self-negativity. And when it happened, I constructed this critic that *sounded* like it was an outside voice, but what it really *was* was something that I had created, based on things I had heard, based on what I had seen, and then based on what I was feeling...I constructed, like, this outsider that never really existed, and I just kept perpetuating it. I think a lot of us do that.

Cameron’s remarks point to another way in which the features of digital environments have amplified the impacts of intra-community callouts. Being targeted for such a callout -- especially if the callout goes viral, or if it escalates into a cancellation -- can be profoundly damaging for the self-esteem and psychological well-being of those targeted. However, by highlighting these users’ mistakes (and making it easy for users to collate and reference a record of *other* users’ wrongdoings), today’s social media platforms produce an environment where these kinds of demands for accountability can feel all-consuming. The relentless exposure to these events that social media provides can feel overwhelming, yielding consequences for users’ mental health even if they never experience (or, for that matter, are never even present to observe in real time) an intra-community callout themselves.

Anonymity

Another feature of many online platforms that can hold allure for TNB+ people is anonymity (or, in some cases, pseudonymity) -- the option to separate one's online persona (or personas), in whole or in part, from one's offline identity. Anonymity or pseudonymity can afford users a measure of privacy, but they also have the potential to foster apprehension about whether other users "really are" the people they present themselves to be. Thus, anonymity serves to further exacerbate the climate of surveillance and boundary policing that pervades many TNB+ online communities. As established group members become anxious about monitoring community boundaries, trying to ensure that these protected spaces aren't infiltrated or compromised -- a taller order, when users can remain anonymous or maintain multiple concurrent accounts without detection -- they also become more likely to question or to challenge the identity claims of other users.

Anonymity also has the potential to incentivize intra-community harassment in other ways. For instance, most Internet users are well aware that "anonymous" users sometimes conduct themselves in ways that they wouldn't face-to-face — a phenomenon known as the *online disinhibition effect* (Suler 2004). Platforms that afford anonymity or pseudonymity tend to report higher rates of "trolling," cyberbullying, and other forms of online harassment (Fox et al 2015). Participants were well-acquainted with this pattern, and remarked upon it frequently in interviews. Presley (22, they/them), for example, said that "people on the Internet like to find reasons to start arguing, and they like to wreak havoc for no reason -- just 'cause it's fun. There's no consequences when you're behind a screen, or at least it feels that way. These people probably wouldn't do this [stuff] to people in real life, but there's a disconnect, [where] they're just, like, 'I can do whatever I want.'" Fern (22, they/them), too, noted that they had intentionally disabled the option to leave

anonymous comments on their Tumblr page, agreeing that “people are a lot less hostile when they can’t hide behind anonymity.” Rigby (23, he/they) recalled watching a group of trans women in one of his favorite Facebook groups tearing down the photograph of another trans woman: a woman who had argued on her blog that trans women shouldn’t be required to shave their facial hair in order to be viewed as women. The comments were quite vicious -- users called this woman “fugly,” said that she was making other women in the community “look bad,” and so on -- and Rigby remembered thinking that these women would have been ashamed to make such comments to the woman’s face:

[Online], I think you can reach a lot of people without actually saying it to the person you’re targeting’s face. Like, I don’t think -- I don’t think [the woman being targeted] was even in that group, but like, somebody shared one of her articles, and, like, a picture of her, and was like, ‘why is [looking like] this considered okay by us now?’ And, like -- Christ, ‘cause it is? I don’t know!...I think that, like, [the person who shared and criticized the photo] had the space to be pissed that somebody else wasn’t ‘trans-ing’ the way she wanted them to, and, like -- without actually having to confront this person, and see her react, and be like, ‘what the fuck?’

Thus, although many TNB+ young people *seek out* spaces affording anonymity as a means of self-protection, that anonymity can also place users at interpersonal risk. These risks led some users to intentionally minimize the opportunity for anonymous engagement with their social media profiles. Fern (22, they/them), for instance, explained that they had intentionally disabled the option to leave anonymous comments on their Tumblr content, noting that “people are a lot less hostile when they can’t hide behind anonymity.” Lyric (19, they/them) mentioned that while many Tumblr users chose to create a page on Ask.FM -- a popular platform enabling users to ask and answer anonymous questions -- to link to their blogs, they had shied away from doing the same:

That's why I like to stick away from, like...have you heard of...Ask.FM?...I try and stick away from shit like that, and anonymous messaging. It's, like -- this is just, you know, a backdoor for trolls to get through, and doesn't really have any good purposes.

Not only does anonymity create conditions necessary for harassment to flourish, but it can also make it more difficult for users to identify their attackers and demand retribution, in the event that they *do* experience harassment. Most perniciously of all, when users are presented as anonymous, the potential for disclosure of their “real” identities becomes a clear liability. If information that can be used to identify particular users is made visible online, antagonists can then leverage their knowledge of a user’s “real” identity to place that user at risk (as happens, for example, when users are “doxxed,” as discussed in Chapter 5).

Given these possibilities, socializing in spaces that offer *less* anonymity -- for example, Facebook -- might seem to offer users more protection. However, there are trade-offs to consider: decreasing the potential for anonymity can reduce some risks, but introduces others. One clear risk for many trans and non-binary people is the risk of being identified and outed -- a risk that deters many trans and non-binary people from using Facebook altogether, and that helps to drive users participation in spaces that offer anonymity. Closely related is the liability introduced by a person’s existing network ties: when call-outs or cancellations occur, these ties have the potential to be weaponized. Group members seeking to undermine a user’s reputation can leverage these connections to spread word of the user’s misdeeds, damaging that user’s existing relationships. One favored strategy that can be implemented in this domain is to contact a user’s parents or other family members directly -- another strategy that can serve to incite drama and to strain familial relationships, even in circumstances where all parties involved are already aware of the user’s status as TNB+. Kai (22, they/she/he), for example, described how being able to visualize another user’s network ties can exacerbate the impact of a call-out or cancellation:

I think Facebook is a lot more cliquy. Like, on Tumblr, it's more like a bunch of voices yelling at the sun, basically. But on Facebook, everyone knows each other, and you can see that guy went to a party with that guy, or that guy lives [in X dormitory] and goes to school with you. I mean, I feel like everyone knows each other -- in kind of, like, a bad way...I'll be talking to somebody, and he'll be like, 'oh, yeah, don't -- don't talk to that guy. He's a cuck,' or something. And I'll be like, 'what?' I'll be like, 'how do you know this?' And he'll be like, 'oh, well, when I went to school with them [back] in 1982, they said something very TERFy that I think was very inappropriate.' And I'll be, like, 'oh -- okay?'...I mean, Tumblr's more likely to freak out on you for small things. But on Facebook, they're more likely to, like, message your mom or something.

An insidious feedback loop emerges: users seeking anonymity (in an effort to evade being outed to colleagues or family members) may flock to platforms (like Tumblr or Reddit) that afford such anonymity, only to find that the pervasive harassment and identity challenges they confront in these spaces make them unlivable. However, while organizing one's online social life around platforms that tether accounts to recognizable off-line identities (like Facebook) can curb some of the harassment facilitated by total anonymity, it can also make it easier for antagonists that *do* harass in these spaces to do real harm. Kai's comments also help to emphasize how social media can afford the *persistence* of discrediting information -- not only by directing audiences toward a user's existing network ties, but by enabling accounts of a user's misdeeds to persist in the public sphere (or to be resurrected by unknown audiences in the future, causing calls for accountability to arise anew. It is to this issue that we next turn.

Content Persistence and Archiving

Finally, it's important to consider the role that the *persistence* of users' content plays in shaping these kinds of identity challenges. Unless a user chooses to remove it (or to post it in an ephemeral format, like an Instagram Story, that will "self-destruct" with time), content posted to

social media persists online for others to review. As this content accumulates, it forms a digital archive that online audiences (or users themselves) can go back and peruse. While strangers encountered in “meatspace” generally know little about our pasts, those we befriend on social media have access to (potentially massive) repositories of data on our histories -- the types of content we’ve posted and shared, our connections to others, information on our tastes and beliefs and preferences, our presentation of self -- as well as the ability to gauge how these things have *evolved* over time.

There are a number of ways in which TNB+ people stand to benefit from the persistence of online content. Many users find it personally gratifying to keep an online record chronicling their social or physical transitions, and today’s social media platforms make it easy to keep this kind of record. The *persistence* of these records online as part of a public archive, however, also makes it possible for *other* users to review and benefit from them. Many TNB+ users seek information on how to navigate transition, and what to expect if they do so; in that respect, these kinds of “transition logs” can be a valuable resource. Other types of resources — lists of health care providers, community news, and so on — can also be preserved in online groups for later circulation. The “re-tweet” (on Twitter), “re-blog” (on Tumblr), or “share” (on Facebook) features enable content to reach large audiences quickly, and that content’s preservation on the feeds of those who re-circulate it means that the content *persists* for redistribution, even in the event of the original poster’s departure from the site. These affordances help to make social media an attractive tool for the curation of community resources.

However, while this kind of archiving presents multiple benefits, it also opens users up to another kind of vulnerability. As anyone that has ever had their nudes “leaked” (Dodge 2019; Hearn & Hall 2019; McGlynn et al 2017) or had their social media activity questioned during a

job interview (Jacobson & Gruzd 2020) understands all too well, the persistence of content online means that it *remains accessible* to other users, who can then leverage these prior posts in an effort to discredit users or to dispute their identity claims. Several participants referred to this practice as **receipt-keeping** -- taking screenshots or archiving documentation of a user's bad (or inconsistent) behavior that can be used to discredit the user later on. Cameron (22, they/them) explained that "people on Tumblr *love* 'receipts' -- which are, you know, screenshots or documentation of previous error." Presley (22, they/them) said that "[Keeping receipts] is a lot of, like, taking screenshots of private messages and keeping them in saved folders on your computer, and, like -- messages from other websites, and different activity [logs] from other websites, and things, and just keeping track of what somebody's doing -- and when they slip up, releasing all the awful things to the public." Julian (19, he/him) lamented, "I generally feel like people used to just talk behind each other's backs a lot more -- before, like, we could just be, 'here's your screens,' um, and throw it back in their face." Participant Jayde (24, she/her) -- previously targeted by repeated calls for accountability that had involved this type of 'receipt-keeping' -- explained that while she recognized (and was prepared to apologize for) the behavior that had led to these call-outs, the ferocity of others' reactions to her behavior now served as an omnipresent, lurking source of uncertainty and dread:

There [was] quite a bit of receipt-keeping on me, in 2016. And to be fair, I was kind of problematic in -- er, 2017, forgive me. You know, I did have some pretty, like, shit opinions in those days...not, like, deliberate, you know what I mean? [I was], like, [a] Hillary white gay, basically...and, you know, people came at me hard, and, like, all the time...like, somebody, like, made my profile picture their profile picture as a joke. You know -- it was very disturbing, honestly...my least favorite thing is screenshotting something and then, like, posting it, you know, within the group. That's kind of, like -- I don't know It makes you feel kind of sick...[they have] the tactical jump on you. Like, no matter what, you're immediately on the defensive, at the point that's happened.

This is, of course, the expressed goal of much receipt-keeping activity -- the more defensive that users become, the more likely they are to react with anger or to let fly with *new* problematic behavior, underscoring the case for their own eviction from the group.

The fact that digital content often persists online doesn't just make it easier to *instigate* a call-out or cancellation: it also accelerates their *reach*. Many posts remain accessible to other users indefinitely (meaning that they remain ripe for screen-shotting or other forms of outside preservation at any time). Because of this, call-outs and cancellations remain an ever-present possibility -- the fact that a particular post or image doesn't trigger immediate blow-back upon release is no guarantee that it won't be used to discredit the poster in future. When these kinds of issues *are* resurrected and re-circulated online, they can draw vitriol from new audiences, and the scale and intensity of these new outcries can be difficult to anticipate. As participant Lyric (19, they/them) explained:

A post I made, like, a year or two ago got, like, a bunch of attention for no reason -- that was wild. I don't know how someone found it, but someone re-blogged it, and it was like, 'the person in this photo is an anti-Semite.' I'm like, 'what? No, they aren't -- you're wrong.' And then it was dumb -- just discourse. But yeah -- also, for some reason, like, sometimes I haven't posted, like, even -- something that I posted years ago, and out of nowhere, it just gets notes, and I'm like, 'what?' Old, old posts have gotten feedback.

In addition, the effort to avoid call-outs or cancellations online often involves not only scrutinizing one's *own* content and activity, but also the content and activity of those to whom one is connected -- a monitoring of what Zappavigna terms "ambient affiliation" (Zappavigna 2014). As noted in the previous chapter, social media has made it possible to gain a sense of a person's ideals and intentions now not only by listening to their words and seeing what they post, but also by looking at the kinds of content (and people) that they *interact* with (for instance, the pages or people they follow; the brands they endorse; the TV shows they watch, etc.). Thus, users can be

held to account not only as a result of the identity claims that they've made directly, but also for the identity claims that others may *infer* based on their preferences, tastes, and existing network connections. While a suite of tools exist today -- including, for instance, applications like Timehop and Facebook's "Memories" feature, which prompt users to peruse their previously-posted content on a regular basis -- to aid users in reviewing (and, where necessary, removing) outdated or potentially problematic posts, no technology yet exists with which users can regularly review *others'* content. Moreover, while things like the appropriation of AAVE or the use of a homophobic slur might "leap out" at users upon review (prompting removal), removing evidence of a user's tastes and preferences can be orders of magnitude more challenging.

The persistence of online content can ultimately render some users reluctant to engage in online communities altogether -- particularly communities that favor text or image-based posting. While communities that afford voice chat have been shunned in the literature as contributing to cyberbullying (Sanders & Brierley 2016; McLean & Griffiths 2019; McInroy & Mishna 2017), several participants noted that this feature has taken on a new allure in the age of receipt-keeping. Participant Milo (21, he/they) described using the platform Discord to connect with other trans and non-binary people, citing the synchronous voice chat option as a tool to help circumvent intra-community conflict:

Discord is where I go to talk shit about people, especially in voice chat, because I don't like posting things -- uh, I don't like posting how I feel about people who are particularly shitty in our community. But I still have to have some form of venting about the community, [so] I would consider voice -- because, um, it [text] can eventually get screen-shotted and blown up in my face. And I am NOT about that.

Milo's comments suggest that platforms that are able to afford synchronous interaction while *also* protecting users' identities (such as Discord) -- along with other features that afford

ephemerality, like Instagram and Facebook Stories -- are likely to continue increasing in popularity among stigmatized users (including TNB+ youth).

“It’s SO Much Fun”: The Pleasures of Participating in Online Accountability Actions

Of course, just because a social media platform *affords* a particular type of interaction doesn’t necessarily mean that users will *propagate* that kind of behavior. Identity challenges, callouts, and cancellations are not *products* of these digital environments; the online context just makes it easier for them to root and spread. There are two factors at play in helping to *ground* these kinds of conflicts. One, as discussed above, is the desire to keep these spaces safe for TNB+ people, and to defend them against the threat of intrusion. The second is the *pleasure* of participating in call-outs and cancellations: the intra-community “status boost” that some users receive for instigating such conflicts, and the corresponding sense of fulfillment and righteousness that others receive for stoking the fire.

Those that participate in frequent online call-outs and identity challenges -- for example, the “social justice warrior” described by Urban Dictionary (2011) -- are often scapegoated as participating in “virtue-signaling” (Nagle 2017) or derided as attention-seeking (Clingan 2017). While participants in this sample emphasized the need for safe, community-specific space as a more fundamental driver of intra-community conflict, they acknowledged that the desire to be seen as a “crusader” or a “hero” can also serve as motivation to confront others. As participant Sophia (23, she/her), who scoffed at identity challenges and callouts as largely “performative,” summarized:

Like, [there’s] *so much* of it that’s just performative right now, and, like -- people are like, ‘oh, no, we have to be mad about every single thing’...there’s a couple of individuals who

I think got a taste of crusading as, like, an egotistical experience -- like, fulfilling, in some not-good-ways for them. So a small group of people break off to start doing that kind of stuff, and supposedly trying to help people out of bad situations -- like, say, accusing someone of being an abuser. And [then] the person you're saying is being abused [comes] stepping in, like, 'no -- I don't know where you're getting this from.' And then [the person that instigated the conflict starts] giving death threats to the person they're supposedly trying to protect -- so, there have been some breakdowns there.

Jayde (24, she/her) echoed Sophia's comments about the thrill of playing "crusader," while adding that even users who have no role in *instigating* conflict have the potential to gain credibility or make themselves "look good" by piling on:

[There are some] people that are, like, really abusive, and, like, sociopathic, and, like, abuse these spaces sometimes, and argue a lot for clout, I think....especially [on] Twitter, but also in closed groups on Facebook. Like, sometimes it'll just be, like -- somebody will say something wrong, and suddenly that's kind of, like, the bad guy of the day, kind of? Like, [it's] a big snowball, and everybody, like, says negative things about them. But the people that, like, kind of roast that person the hardest, or, you know, go the hardest, kind of, like, gain clout, I think.

There are a number of social-psychological factors at play in organizing this cascading response. "Crusading" to keep the community safe enhances users' feelings of attachment to their identity group (in this case, reinforcing perceptions of self as "trans enough" to speak on behalf of other TNB+ people). It can also lead to an intra-community status boost, born out of others' perceptions of the crusader as an advocate and a force for good -- a phenomenon that Nagle (2017) labels "virtue-signaling." The allure of being perceived as a hero -- especially when evidence of a user's *heroism* and *honor* has the propensity to "go viral" and persist online, just like evidence of misconduct -- can be difficult for some users (particularly those that are already prominent within the community) to resist.

It's not just self-appointed crusaders, however, who contribute to this kind of antagonism. As Danny (24, he/him) noted, it's also possible for users to develop a taste for being *targeted* in these conflicts, deriving pleasure from "baiting" crusaders into a fight:

It seems that, like, [people] get at each other's throats, and -- *intentionally*, almost -- like, make themselves open up to being attacked, or, like -- [people will be] attacking other people, just to stir shit up and start drama. Like, I hate to say it, but I've seen that happen, like -- in *multiple* times now...I don't know if it's, like, uh -- like, [an] 'I don't have anything better to do on the Internet' type thing, or if it's, like, [an] 'I don't have any, like, real community in my life, and so, like, I feel like I need to, like, nit-pick at this,' and stuff. I imagine it's, like, a combination of the two, for most of these people. Um, but -- yeah. I definitely -- I do see that happening.

Finally, there are some that delight in the simple thrill of *witnessing* intra-community conflict. Even users that don't involve themselves directly can gain a sense of camaraderie and belonging from participating in conflicts "in spirit." Xan (20, he/they), for instance, described how exciting he found it to follow call-out threads on Twitter, explaining how watching these events unfold reinforced his sense of affiliation with the groups affronted:

Uh, I don't know -- I, I hate drama. I hate being a part of it. I hate it with a passion. But there is just *such* a good feeling in watching someone who deserves, uh, to get every amount of credibility torn out from under them -- it's SO much fun to watch that happen, live...It makes my life feel more exciting, even though I know it's not...It makes it -- it makes me feel, um, like I'm a part of relative -- relevant events, when I'm not. And it keeps me -- I don't know. It makes me feel better about my boring old life.

Xan's remarks suggest that social media doesn't just make people more likely to *instigate* call-outs and cancellations, but also more likely to *consume* and *observe* these events. Even those who are unwilling or unable to actively participate in callouts can contribute to their spread (e.g., by retweeting/reblogging information about them) or reward those that give these interactions

airtime (e.g., by driving traffic to platforms where call-out and cancellation “drama” is more frequently reported; see Nakamura 2015). In this sense, even *passive* participation in these kinds of accountability practices has the potential to reinforce perceptions of group belonging -- a powerful promise, to young people that already feel socially isolated (and even more powerful, perhaps, for those that are *new* to trans spaces online, or that experience greater anxiety about being called out or cancelled themselves). These findings reaffirm the idea that while improving community design or changing the affordances on offer in these spaces may *help* to curtail intra-community harassment and identity challenges, it is unlikely to eliminate such harassment outright.

Consequences of Call-Outs and Cancellations

As the excerpts above attest, there’s a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction to be had by participating in call-outs and cancellations. However, when these conflicts target those who are *already* socially marginalized, the *consequences* for those targeted can well outweigh the possible rewards. As noted earlier, the type of call-out enshrined in most modern treatises on “cancel culture” is generally levied towards cultural figureheads -- actors, authors, politicians, and others in positions of wealth and prominence. These people are both well-networked and well-resourced, with the financial and social resources at their disposal to “ride out” the tide of public interest, or to (literally) pay for their misdeeds. Being cancelled by other trans people *as a trans person*, however, is a situation that can be genuinely catastrophic. Cancellations and call-outs -- or, in some cases, even the *threat* of cancellations or call-outs -- can serve to cut TNB+ young people off from one of the only conduits of social support that may be accessible to them. Losing access to online support communities can mean losing one’s *only* connection to information about transition, or be tantamount to losing the only “family” that some have left.

Thus, while it would be easy to construe online call-outs as part and parcel of the other “routine” harassment young people navigate on social media, the consequences of these kinds of identity challenges can in fact be quite severe — even life-altering. The online context itself helps to shape the *scale* of the threat presented by these sorts of incidents. As described earlier, social media platforms enable users to rapidly compile and disseminate information, to recipients both known and unknown -- and once shared, this information *persists* in the public sphere where it can be revived and recirculated at any time (without the consent -- or even the knowledge -- of the parties originally involved). Discrediting information posted online can thus take on a life of its own, damaging a user’s reputation beyond repair. As participant Malachi (20, he/they) observed, because so many TNB+ people are reliant upon one another for both emotional *and* material support, this kind of discrediting can yield real-world repercussions for health and well-being:

You don’t want to have people, like, ‘cancel’ you...that also means you lose access to certain forms of support — a *lot* of support, in trans communities especially. ‘Cause it’s, like, if someone has a GoFundMe [to pay for transition-related expenses] and you’re, like, ‘cancelled,’ you don’t get access to any medical treatment.

Indeed, the precise situation described by Malachi actually *happened* to participant Cosmo (25, it/they), who was called out online by a user that questioned its diagnosis of cervical cancer (and ultimately derailed the fundraiser Cosmo had set up to fund its cancer treatment):

With the rise of callout and cancel culture, um, if you do something on Tumblr that is perceived as, like, you know, not perfect, and the wrong -- or perhaps the right -- person decides to call you out, it can ruin your -- your online reputation, in a way that reaches all platforms, and even -- even your, your offline life...I mean, I had an experience like that with Tumblr. Um, when I was, uh, trying to, um, raise money for -- for my, my hysterectomy, and doing commissions, and trying to get crowd-funding there, because, um, my insurance wouldn’t cover it...because I was trans, it was considered “elective,” and I didn’t get coverage for that, even as it reached an emergency point. But on Tumblr, I got

called out for “faking it.” Um, someone -- someone sent me an anonymous message, uh, asking me...to upload my private medical documents, and “prove” that I’m not just “scamming everyone.” And when I was like, “what the fuck? No!”, I got called out publicly. And it -- [sigh] It led to, uh, a -- a real shitstorm. I -- I even had, like, people on Reddit posting things -- just, like, to make fun of me, or to call me out for this, that, or the other, when I’ve never really done anything.

Even in cases where call-outs introduce no significant *financial* liability, they can still precipitate tremendous *emotional* upheaval. Being targeted for repeated call-outs or identity challenges prove seriously damaging to participants’ mental health. Virality and content persistence can make even relatively isolated instances of harassment seem relentless, giving users the sense that the vitriol can be revived at any time. Presley (22, they/them) explained, “[Harassment] is everywhere...I’ve literally seen people deactivate their accounts and leave [altogether], because people harass them so much.” This is what Ramona (20, they/he) did to protect *their* mental health, after watching a close friend suffer an online attack so relentless that she contemplated suicide:

I’ve begun to try to pull back from the negative -- the more negative spaces that I was involved in, that just made me feel like shit. And I’ve tried to create meaningful spaces for myself, where I can feel supported and healthy, but also that aren’t -- that are still, like, stimulating and challenging for me, because I -- I can’t filter out *everything* negative...[but] I’ve seen [call-outs] do some bad shit to people. Thankfully, that hasn’t really happened to me personally, but I’ve seen other people have, like, whole-ass breakdowns because of -- because of just constant, never-ending torrents of negativity...like, right now, my girlfriend is dealing with one of her friends who’s been involved in, like, a massive, really scandalous call-out, and who, like -- it landed them in the hospital. Like, this is *today* -- this is *happening*. Like, this happened last night -- she went to the hospital for suicidal ideation. It’s still happening -- in the Year of Our Lord, 2019, people are still calling each other out so viciously that it makes grown-ass adults in their mid-20s go to the hospital. And I think it’s because of, like, being divorced from the reality -- because it’s through a screen, and you don’t really *see* the impact that you’re having.

Importantly, callouts and cancellations aren't just ineffective boundary-maintenance tools because they work to drive *legitimate* (if less experienced) community members away. By framing those who *have* done wrong as beyond redemption, participants also observed that callouts and cancellations can actively *discourage* those who *do* perpetrate harm in these spaces from changing their behavior. Rigby (23, he/they), for instance, observed that castigating wrongdoers as irredeemable reinforces the "moral purity" of the crusader (yielding intra-community social benefits), while also reinforcing the idea that people are incapable of growth or change:

There is a little bit of, like, a moral purity thing going on -- like, [for example], you had to unilaterally support sex workers from the beginning, or else you're not doing it now. Like -- and I really value people's abilities to listen to evidence, or first-hand accounts, and say, 'I fucked up,' and, like, 'my opinion was bad and wrong, and I don't think it any more'...but [people want to say], like, 'she was gross a long time ago, and now she's gross forever and ever.' And I think that's [wrong]...like, I don't want to continually excuse bad behavior over and over, um, but I think if somebody has legitimately grown, um, past something that was really culturally acceptable and *also* shitty -- that we should kind of let them, I guess?

Other participants echoed Rigby's sentiment. Danny (24, he/him) argued that "I think especially with queer people, like -- pushing somebody out of the community, instead of trying to, like, work with them through shit? That is so harmful...because people fuck up, and then they can learn, they can do better." Sophia (23, she/her) reinforced this idea, arguing that people who have been "cancelled" and blacklisted have little incentive to change:

[With] cancel culture...it's like, 'oh, you did one bad thing, so we're calling you out, and you're fucked forever.' I think that's, like, highly problematic -- not only because it's aggressive, but it also ignores humanity. It ignores the chance to grow and change. It ignores -- not only does it do that, but it *discourages* change. And I feel like what we've done with, like, cancel culture, is, like, basically create a place where people don't want to change, because they know it doesn't matter, and they're just going to dig in their heels.

Cameron (22, they/them) -- who majored in music as an undergraduate -- compared the issue to their experiences in music class, arguing that the rush to frame wrongdoers as “bad” tends to flatten the account of the wrongdoing (meaning that neither the accused *nor* those looking on learn much from the experience):

For some reason, when it's just like, 'yeah, let's just take screenshots of all the shitty things, 'cause people can't change or learn,' you know -- like, people *can't* change or learn?...[it's] like, 'oh, they're just -- they're bad. I read a callout.' And that, you know -- we get into my music classroom. Like, we talk about Wagner and what a piece of shit he is, for sure -- but we talk about *why* Wagner is such a piece of shit, [and] *why* his corpus, his oeuvre, contributed to, you know, Nazi nationalism. We don't just be like, 'oh, Wagner's bad' ...they're not talking about the institutional inequality, the root of his power, and we're not addressing it...if we don't understand *why* it's bad, we can't combat it...[and] I *deeply* think that's from Tumblr culture, and Internet culture in general. I think it's this weird intersection of, like, watered-down social justice culture through Tumblr, and then just, like -- online culture of, like, 'something's bad,' and it's 'cancelled' automatically, without examining the structural roots of why.

While the features of today's social media platform promote the widespread circulation of context, they do little to afford the widespread circulation of *context*. Platforms like Twitter and Tumblr afford the virality and content persistence that enable callouts and cancellations to gain traction, but they don't do so by rewarding nuanced, long-form analyses: they encourage short, pithy takes, rapid recirculation of call-outs and receipts (in the absence of context), and the production of inflammatory, click-worthy commentary capable of competing for eyeballs in social media's attention-based economy. These features of social media all serve to flatten or to simplify debates about users' wrongdoing. Moreover, as Cameron's comments emphasize, while call-outs and cancellations are very effective at framing the harms done by *individual* users, chastising lone users or removing them from these communities can do little to remediate the *structural*

inequalities that precipitated that harm -- especially when the users targeted are themselves marginalized (and, as such, had little in the way of substantive power or influence to begin with).

Strategies to Avoid Call-Outs and Cancellations

The preceding sections have established the prevalence and intensity of identity challenges, callouts, and cancellations in TNB+ online communities, as well as elaborating some of the *consequences* of these challenges. In this final section, I highlight some of the strategies that participants in my sample deployed in an effort to *avoid* such challenges. I argue that many of these strategies -- while undoubtedly useful in helping to circumvent call-outs -- ultimately serve to “chill” community participation (in many of the same ways that callouts and identity challenges themselves do). In this sense, a high propensity for intra-community conflict can contribute to an atmosphere in TNB+ spaces that inhibits self-expression, information gathering, *and* the formation of community ties: in effect, the same constellation of benefits that draw TNB+ young people into such spaces from the outset.

Strategy #1: Avoidance

The ongoing threat of harassment by other users can make new community members (and would-be members) reluctant to engage at all. Some users chose instead to “lurk” in their chosen communities, refraining from posting their own content to make themselves less vulnerable. Many participants leveraged this tactic at one point or another (either temporarily, or as a long-term strategy). User Crystal (19, she/her) explained that when she spends time online, “I typically just don’t, like, express anything. I just, like, quietly subscribe to the ideas...you’re posting to, like, a thousand people, or ten thousand people. Like, I don’t want to step on any toes.” Brynn (22, they/she) agreed, saying, “[I’m] Switzerland. I don’t get involved. [If] it’s starting to get really

heated, I would avoid that...I definitely would just avoid certain groups and stuff like that, and not touch that with a ten-foot pole, because it [isn't] worth it. I've watched people, like, just *vanish* from social media, because of what people say and do." Izzy (18, they/she) echoed, "putting out personal experiences and, like, connecting with other people [is] scary to me, because I don't want to say the wrong thing." Sebastian (20, they/them) laughed, "I don't engage. I just observe. I just consume." Even Avery (22, they/them), an "incurable extrovert" and self-admitted lover of confrontation, agreed that "the thing that actually works is just sitting and watching."

Sitting and watching can be a viable strategy -- not only to circumvent callouts in the moment, but also to help users buttress themselves against the possibility of *future* callouts. Waiting at the periphery of the group and observing other members offers users an opportunity to learn from others' mistakes. Participant Jo (22, they/she), for instance, said "sometimes I see things on Facebook and I just kind of keep my mouth shut, because I see people get cancelled over saying something wrong or asking questions. And so [I'll] just turn notifications on, and I'll read what they say, and let somebody else make the mistake for me." This kind of "observational learning" (Ashuri et al 2018) allows users to gain perspective on community norms without opening themselves up to targeted conflict. Participant Kai (22, they/she/he) emphasized that watching also protects a user from the possibility of being dragged into conflict against their will. Something as simple as "liking" or reacting to a post renders a user *visible* to others, and makes them part of the conversation; from there, it's easy for potential antagonists to comb through one's (public) profile data, review content one might have contributed to the group in the past, tag the user and draw them into discussion, or message the user directly with unwanted comments. As Kai explained, "I can just watch, you know -- just see what's going on, and people can't really drag me into it."

Some users find just the process of *observing* intra-community “discourse” to be anxiety-provoking, and choose periods of total disengagement to recharge. Several participants described intervals of time where they’d chosen to “step away” from particular groups or platforms, or had “muted” content from particular online sources (for example, turning off notifications for a particular Facebook group, or “snoozing” a group’s content (temporarily preventing it from appearing on their Facebook timelines)). Participant Jo (22, they/she), for instance, described taking a “mental health break” from Facebook every few months, when things started to feel overwhelming:

Like, the Internet is kind of horrible. I try not to think about it that much, because it’s -- like, I get to points where I have to -- I’ll, I’ll delete my -- uh, not ‘delete,’ but you can temporarily deactivate your Facebook for, you know -- [you can] say, ‘turn back on in about a week.’ So I’ll have to do that every couple of months, when things get a little too - - uh, aggressive, I guess, online, and stuff...once every few months, I just distance myself from it.

While taking a break from social media or stepping away from a particular platform can be an effective strategy for some, it also carries consequences. Abstaining from engagement also means that users miss out on the benefits — both social and individual — that those who do post regularly are able to access. For one, disengaging from social media altogether isn’t a viable option for many of today’s young adults. Many of the participants in this sample had initially elected to join Facebook or Twitter because they were *instructed* to -- for example, as part of a job, or as part of a class assignment. In many ways, participation on social media is a prerequisite to full social engagement -- a place where events are planned, where romances unfold, where homework assignments are issued, and where family members connect. In this sense, some may be truly unable (or unwilling) to disengage from these spaces altogether. Even for those that aren’t *compelled* to use social media, stepping back from trans-focused spaces online can carry heavy

costs. Bradley (18, he/they), for example, who chose to take a social media “hiatus” after experiencing harassment on Twitter, noted that these benefits can be quite profound:

I stopped posting stuff on social media about my [gender and] sexual orientation for a couple months, and I had missed out on so much! I wasn’t really involved with the community that I had gained...the only way I could stay connected with them was through social media, and the only way I could ask questions about what other people were experiencing —what I was experiencing — was through social media.

Strategy #2: Proactive Content Management

Another strategy that some participants used to manage these risks was to take a proactive stance toward managing their own content online. For some, this meant remaining attentive to whether -- and how -- other users *accessed* their content. Many participants described vigilantly curating (and intermittently reviewing) their privacy settings, ensuring that unknown audiences had as little access as possible to information about their lives. This in itself can be a complex endeavor, as Ramona (20, they/he) described, because the degree of privacy available (and the tools on offer to secure that privacy) tend to differ by platform:

My Facebook is entirely private. Nobody can see if I've been tagged in posts...if I comment on somebody else's post, nobody can see that either. Um, my privacy settings are airtight on Facebook, especially. Twitter is a lot harder to do, because I still want to interact -- to be able to interact with the world at large, and for people to be able to engage with me, but it's a lot harder to control that. And then Tumblr is, like, the wild card, because there are no privacy settings to speak of. The only thing you can do is that you can prevent your blog from showing up [in] search results -- so, you can suppress search results on Google, *through* Tumblr...[and] the other thing is to password-protect your blog. And so it's really, really -- Tumblr, you can't really do a lot at all to keep yourself safe. And I think that's probably actually why I've stepped back from engaging in it so much, now that I reflect on it, because it's just so hard to control who can and can't see exactly every single thing that I'm posting about.

For other participants, managing access to their content meant deterring *particular* users (or groups of users) from accessing it. In spaces where rendering one's profile and content "private" is a logistical impossibility, one of the most straightforward ways to curb harassment is to block the access of community members that are likely to harass. Fern (22, they/them), for instance, explained that "I know people will make use of the 'block' button [on some platforms] very liberally, if they feel like their inbox is being invaded. Some people have had to turn off the 'anonymous' feature, too, because people are a lot less hostile when they can't hide behind anonymity." Participant River (23, they/them) made extensive use of their block lists, too, explaining:

I just avoid people...if I see stuff like [harassment], I am pretty quick to just block them...I've learned to cut off people who were making things hard, [or] were making it hard for me to be myself. And I've made friends with more people who are more accepting, and who knew more about those kinds of things.

In addition to managing *access* to their content, many users remained vigilant about reviewing the *content* of their posts and profiles, recognizing that "forgetting" about discarded content risked having it resurface as a "receipt" later on. Participant Sophia (23, she/her), for instance, described reviewing her old tweets and Facebook posts on a regular basis, removing or editing posts that might discredit her later:

As far as, uh, taking the [content] down myself, I have actually done that -- not with [the threat of cancellation] in mind, but it's been, like, 'huh -- I know that I've said some fucked up shit in the past. I should probably make sure that's gone, because it's fucked up.' Like, a personal moral thing -- I've gone back through my old tweets and been like, 'really?' Right? Like, 'did I really type the n-word without even using an [asterisk]? Like, what the fuck is wrong with me?' So, like, that kind of thing -- like, I've gone back through for my own, like, moral standing -- not so much, like, fear of people calling me out. [But] that is also something I have seen people in the community talk about being afraid of.

Applications like Timehop and Facebook's "Memories" feature now help to *prompt* this retrospective review for users -- an affordance that can help make it easier to circumvent later callouts or identity challenges, as Cameron (22, they/them) described:

I go through Timehop, and [if] I find something that may have accidentally represented a worldview that I don't hold any more, I do delete that. That's a -- you know, I think about hirability. And, you know, I don't -- those posts typically aren't, like, me talking about my queerness. It's more like, 'oops' -- like, 'now I know that this is, like, kind of anti-Indigenous. I'm gonna -- I'm gonna delete this, 'cause it's got the word Eskimo in it, and that's not a good word' ...that kind of thing.

While these kinds of applications have made the systematic review of previously-posted content "easier," participants repeatedly emphasized that this kind of content management requires not only constant vigilance (and, thus, in some respects, constant anxiety), but also an intensive investment of energy and time. The labor involved can ultimately discourage some users from the whole enterprise, steering them towards "lurking" or disengagement instead. Another cohort of users, however, chose a third path: recognizing the persistence of online content as an ongoing liability, they opted instead to embrace ephemerality. Lee (25, they/them), for instance, favored Instagram as a platform explicitly because of the Instagram "Stories" feature -- a modality where posts disappear after 24 hours:

I use the Stories feature...I just like looking at the Stories real quick. Like, going through everyone -- I don't know. It's really quick. But I guess also probably 'cause they're less permanent -- like, they go away at the end of the day, so if, like, I'm embarrassed, or I, like, changed my mind or whatever, then I just forget about it, and then I'm fine.

Danny (24, he/him) also favored posting content as Instagram Stories. Hoping to offer others perspective on the process of recovering from bottom surgery, Danny had posted regular

post-surgical updates to a bottom-surgery-focused Facebook group after the first stage of his metoidioplasty, and had started a Tumblr blog to document the experience (where users could view content -- for instance, photos -- deemed too graphic to share on Facebook). He abandoned both of these spaces, however, and switched over to Instagram Stories following his second procedure, when the volume of questions and comments from others (both antagonists, and people with genuine questions) became too overwhelming:

I think since surgery, I guess, I've been -- like, overall, like -- I've pulled away from, like, that more, like, open bottom surgery group, and also from Tumblr...and I find myself posting a lot more on Instagram. Um, I think that the -- the Stories are -- those are, like, really good-feeling to me, because I knew that, like -- they're only for, like, 24 hours. Like, I know that, like -- [if] I am going through some, like, heavy shit that I might not want to think about in 24 hours, if I put it on there, people can see it -- and then, like, it's gone....after surgery is when I really started utilizing that, and -- yeah, I think just, like, generally firing more updates on Instagram, because every time I got on Tumblr, there were, like, 20 more asks. And it was exhausting to think about, like, doing that, when, like...I was not in, like, a position to, like, answer people's, like, questions about surgery and stuff. Like, I needed, like, support -- like, for *me*.

For Danny, the ephemerality of his Instagram Stories was empowering: it placed a firm limit on the interval of time during which others could comment on his content, or ask him questions about it. But at the same time, this reflection belies a *drawback* of this ephemerality: when the availability of content is time-restricted, content can't be archived, and it doesn't persist as a resource for others in the community. Those that may have benefitted or learned from Danny's recovery blog on Tumblr will now be forced to look for information elsewhere. Since the archiving of user content has done so much to improve the accessibility of information on trans identities (particularly for users in rural or conservative areas, who may have few other outlets), this turn away from content persistence -- while understandable -- can also represent a real loss.

Strategy #3: Fracturing

Another strategy users often embrace to avoid identity challenge is to faction themselves off from broader TNB+-focused spaces, forming sub-communities or enclaves with even *more* specific guidelines for admission. For instance -- to choose an example from my *own* social media experience -- the all-purpose LGBTQ+ Facebook group “sounds gay, I’m in” has spawned a variety of spin-off groups over the past few years, including “sounds bi, I’m in” (which then gave rise to a “grandchild” group called “sounds pan, I’m in,” born out of antipathy towards the label “bisexual”). One common pattern in TNB+-focused spaces is for non-binary members to “spin off” from the main group, in an effort to avoid the harassment that so often pervades spaces frequented by the binary-aligned. As Jo (22, they/she) explained, this kind of fracturing is recognized as a common and accepted part of moving through online communities that are meant to serve as “safe spaces”:

When it comes to [kicking people out of] groups and stuff like that, I -- I don't think it's, it's exactly the same as, like, ‘cancelling someone’ in society, because it's -- it's your group. If you don't want a certain type of person there, then you are free to remove them. Like, that person doesn't deserve to be there. If they want their own space, they can make their own group. So, like, if you want a safe space for, like, just gay people, and anyone says anything bad about gay people? Get rid of them!

While some users faction themselves off into more insular groups while continuing to use the same platforms, others elect to change platforms altogether, seeking spaces where insularity is taken as a norm. Participant Aurora (23, she/her), for instance, explained that she favored Discord for this reason:

I found that the best place that's successful, right now, [where] you can kind of curate a group that's really insular, is Discord. So that's why that's worked out for me...I'm in a trans [Discord] where it's like, ‘Hey, let's share cool ‘adult’ things. This is our ‘adult’ Discord.’

Or, ‘hey, this is my friend group of seven other people I met locally, and we’re all trans or gender non-conforming, and we get along.’

The invite-only mechanics of spaces like Discord can help these spaces to feel *truly* safe, as users have a greater capacity to vet the people to whom they connect. Ramona (20, they/he) described feeling most at home on the invite-only platform “Peach,” with an audience of only her closest friends:

I used to keep track of people, like, that were my online friends on Tumblr. Now I do it on Peach. And I like the -- there’s a degree of anonymity with it, because you can -- you can’t just search someone’s name, and see their profile...it’s more like a personal blog, and you can only visit other people’s personal blogs. I have no idea how to just explain it, but you can only see -- you can see your content, and people that you are mutual friends with can see your content, and that is *it*. No one else can see what you post. So it’s easier to be authentic, and it’s, like, micro-blogging, almost, because of that. But, um, that’s how I keep track of all of my online friends now.

The drawbacks of *this* approach, however, are many. As some information scholars have already suggested, this kind of fracturing can play a key role in the formation of online “echo chambers” (Garrett 2009; Geshke et al 2019) or “filter bubbles” (Parisier 2011; Kanai & McGrane 2020). While these bubbles do indeed serve a protective function, critics have also cautioned that retreat into filter bubbles can minimize exposure to information that challenges a person’s individual attitudes, contributing over time to “radicalization” (Geshke et al 2019), “polarization” (Garrett, 2009), and to the erosion of democratic decision-making (Bodzag & Van den Hoven 2015; Sunstein 2001) -- a phenomenon labeled the “echo chamber effect” (Garrett 2009). In this context, vigilance about maintaining group boundaries often *increases*, and the conflict management skills that drive productive public discourse are even more likely to degrade. As Kanai & McGrane argue in their recent analysis of *feminist* “filter bubbles” in particular (like the

ones that pervade queer and trans online communities), while the emergence of such bubbles can be construed as a response to the climate of “information saturation and politicized vulnerability” (2020, p. 1) that women, people of color, and LGBTQ people continue to negotiate online, navigating these bubbles can be risky in its own right:

Filter bubbles, we suggest, are a vital form of protection of feminist discussion and deliberation, one which may not be afforded otherwise. Yet, while noting that social media architectures have made these enclaves necessary, we do not make a straightforward argument that these bubbles are necessarily ideal spaces for feminist learning and deliberation. Indeed, they may not be experienced as ‘safe,’ as unavoidably political spaces. We note that these ‘enclave deliberations’ (Sunstein 2007) may still be shaped by the limitations of the architectures of social media platforms and logics of consumer control, replicating the filter bubble effect within private groups in further customizing the flow of feminist discussions. (p. 2)

In this sense, retreating into these highly politicized “filter bubbles” has the potential to elevate participants’ anxiety about contributing to group discussions, and to stimulate increased insecurity about the validity of their own identity claims. It should also be recognized that this fracturing has the potential to inhibit the political *mobilization* of trans and non-binary young people. As Adams and Roscigno (2005) have argued, the internal cohesion of social movements depends on their efficacy in establishing (and helping members to maintain) a unified identity. By motivating users to disperse into smaller and smaller factions, the establishment of these “filter bubbles” not only decreases users’ capacity for civil discourse, but also decreases their capacity for collective action -- an important mechanism for future research to attend to, given the ongoing celebration of online communities and social media platforms as launch points for social movement organizing (e.g., Tufekci 2017; Castells 2012; Brown et al 2012).

Strategy #4: Manifesting Accountability

A fourth strategy -- the most challenging to balance successfully, but arguably the most rewarding (and certainly the most productive, from a community-building perspective) -- is to *embrace* the possibility of being called out, and to buttress oneself against reputational damage by preparing to address requests for accountability before they occur. For some users, this can mean working to manifest *transparency* for one's audience, ensuring that their own identities and positionality are clearly stated (and, thus, accounted for in others' interpretations of the commentary and content they provide). Providing an effective "disclaimer" up front can help to minimize accusations of over-stepping community boundaries or making ambiguous identity claims, as Avery (22, they/them) described:

[One of the] things I've done is, like, focusing [more] on word choice? Um, 'staying in my lane,' quote-unquote, whatever that is. Uh, reporting all this context -- sort of acknowledging what communities I am part of when I craft a response, and acknowledging that I'm not gonna be able to cover other communities that might be affected by whatever someone's asking, and that they might have different responses...just being a little more thoughtful about how I actually respond on the Internet to people.

Other participants described manifesting accountability by working to *educate* themselves on issues that might arise. They worked to develop familiarity with the language and behavior of other participants before engaging themselves. Seeming uncertain of one's identity or expressing ambiguous intentions in these spaces can be a liability, and pre-education can help users to feel more confident. As Xan (20, he/they) explained, showing that you've done some "background reading" can encourage community gatekeepers to let their guards down, demonstrating that you've made a good-faith effort to research your questions and find answers on your own *before* seeking help:

All that I've come up with so far is learn as much as you can, about everything related to that subject, before you join the circle -- or *try* to join the circle. That way, you won't *seem* like a total [newbie], and they'll be nicer to you. 'Cause if you walk in knowing nothing, people aren't gonna want to help you. But if you can help THEM out in some way, because you've read up on this thing for, like, 20 hours one night...maybe you can help THEM with an issue, and they can help you.

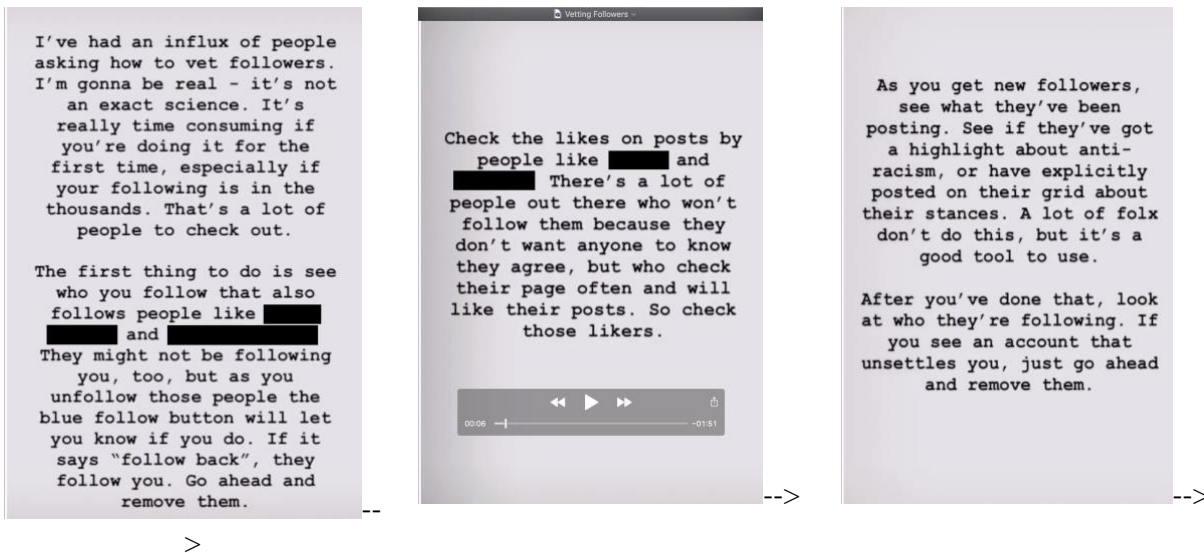
Aurora (23, she/her) built on this idea by acknowledging the benefits this research can have for participants *themselves*. As she noted, educating oneself doesn't just curb the risk of identity challenge or cancellation by making users *look* like they're *trying* to do right -- it can genuinely transform participants' perspectives and make them into better allies, thus rendering them less likely to be called out in the first place:

I found that [socializing online] forces me to be twice as mindful about what I say. And so when it comes to accountability, circling back to that, I found that the biggest thing I can do to have help right now is by being informed, and learning, and being present for my friends who need it...even if it's just sharing articles or something that I read through, it's something. And I think the biggest thing I can do is just be informed, and work on bettering myself, so that way when I *do* have the strength and the energy, I'll be more well prepared to go to bat for those who need it.

While this strategy is arguably the most productive of the four potential responses outlined here (and, essentially, the outcome that those seeking call-outs and cancellations would most hope to yield through their efforts), it too is not without risk. The major liability in *this* situation is *time*: the sheer amount of labor involved in ensuring that one's politics are "up to date" in an era of information overload (Feng et al 2015). This labor is more challenging for some users to provide than it is for others. Users that work full time or attend college may struggle to remain informed, juggling time online against their competing obligations. Users with disabilities or users that lack home Internet access struggle even more. As participant Jayde (24, she/her) remarked, the *class*

politics that undergird this situation are critical (if often left unspoken): “I almost think there’s a big class bias in it, because there’s -- you know, you have to have, like, a really big vocabulary, and, like, learn a lot of stuff in your free time that it wasn’t even part of school to [learn].”

The scope of this demand becomes even clearer when we consider that manifesting accountability means claiming responsibility not only for one’s *own* education and politics, but for the education and politics of one’s followers or the people whose content we consume. Through the mechanism of “ambient affiliation” (Zappavigna 2014), users can also be held accountable for the opinions, behavior, and tastes of those to whom they are *linked*. The Instagram story shared in the figure below, which discusses some of the current best practices for “vetting” one’s online followers, conveys the scale of the labor involved in monitoring and accounting for these online networks:



Having an app that tracks unfollowers is handy, too. If you make a post/story about racism/fatphobia/transphobia/whatever and see your follower count go down, you can check that and add a new person to your block list. Don't be ashamed of a huge block list. Mine sure is.

Another thing I do is pay attention to when I get harassing messages from folk who don't follow me. If I've made a new post to my page in the 24 hours before the message, I'll check the story reshares and see if I can figure out how the harasser got to me. This usually doesn't yield results, but occasionally I'll find a reshare by someone I obviously don't want seeing my stuff.

As far as stories go, I'm also diligent about checking who views my stories. I check daily, and thanks to my autistic super power of remembering usernames I can mentally track who is habitually viewing my stories but not following me. I give people 5 days. If they view my stories for 5 days without following, they get blocked from viewing my stories. I don't outright block them, just restrict story views for the time being. But they're on the mental watchlist if they do decide to follow.

Let me know!
Don't feel like you have to do it all at once. Just do a little bit every day. 😊

Let me know!
Take your time and go slowly

Let me know!
If a person follows quite some BIPOC or has [redacted]

Let me know!
Checking the comments of the posts as well. Some won't like the posts but will comment.

Let me know!
Follow up with people you do know! I checked in with a local dyer who liked a [redacted] post. Cont

Let me know!
She had double tapped by mistake when showing the post to her assistant!

Let me know!
I'm glad I checked in with her

Let me know!
This is one I recommend, too. If you've got a rapport with the person, message them to find out what's up. Maybe it was an accident, maybe not. It's not going to hurt anything to message them

Let me know!
Block all accounts that are private with only a handful of followers

Let me know!
Accounts with like 1-10 followers and maybe 5-20 posts, as well as no pic

Let me know!
Empty profiles. I usually block people who don't post anything or give any profile information.

Let me know!
No men, no kids, no blank accounts

On that last one: my go-to rule with blank/empty looking accounts is to see if any of my trusted followers also follow them. You can always message them before you block if you're willing to have a short conversation with them to feel them out. Just bear in mind that there are some seriously convincing sock puppet accounts out there that will say exactly what you want to hear to get to stay.

Let me know!
They only follow wp, reason why I never had [redacted] Not one POC. Not even the token classics

Let me know!
i have found that nearly all profiles with "anti-bullying" in there will turn out badly.

Let me know!
Watch the stories if your unsure ppl are more open in their stories since they only last 24 h

Let me know!
Checking the "tagged in" tab works in addition to your recs, but it's a bit hit or miss tbh

Let me know!
Don't hesitate to block someone it's for the best

Let me know!
Scroll through captions on generic pics as they're often used for statements re: the poster's stance.

Let me know!
You can also search individuals follow lists.

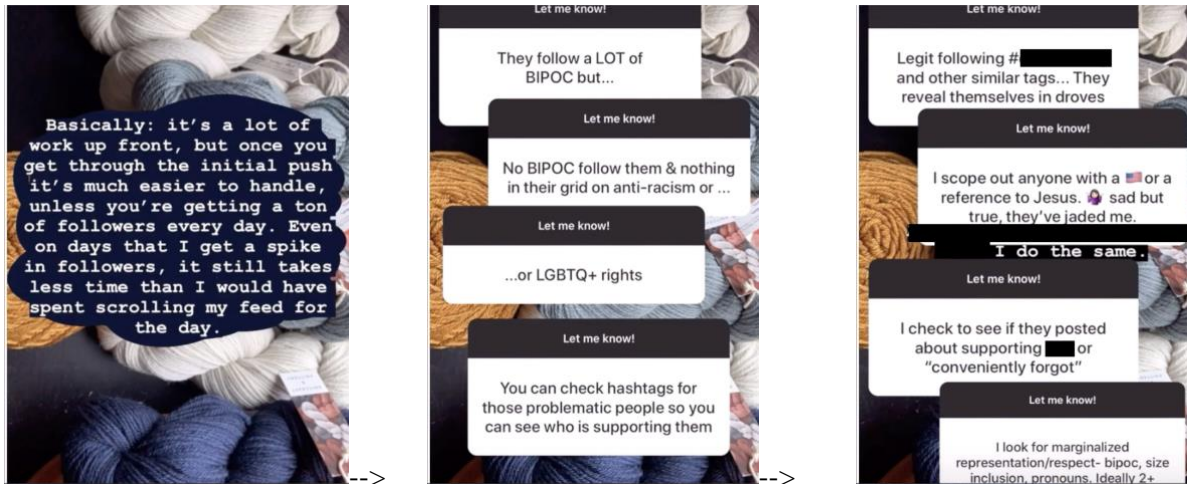


Figure 7.2: An Instagram story shared by participant Emerson (20, they/them) reveals some of the best practices that Instagram users deploy to “vet” their online followers, ensuring that followers’ opinions and beliefs reflect the user’s own.

The Future, By Design: Implications for Theory and Method

Online communities are formative social spaces for many marginalized young people, and trans and gender non-conforming youth are certainly no exception. These spaces provide TNB+ young people with the space they need to cultivate their identities, form relationships, and explore self-presentation away from others’ prying eyes, affording youth a measure of privacy and agency that may be inaccessible in their offline lives. They also afford youth an opportunity to step (if only provisionally) *outside* of their physical bodies — bodies that can be a source of great pain. It’s difficult to overstate the value of these spaces for young people that are struggling: the value of seeing other people like yourself, of finding words to name your feelings, of feeling less alone.

Today’s social media platforms package together a set of features and affordances that may be very attractive to TNB+ young people —the ability to remain (relatively) anonymous, the ability to decenter the body in interactions with others, the ability to rapidly connect and share resources with other community members. However, these affordances themselves are double-edged in nature: just as they introduce new benefits and new strategies of action to TNB+ youth, they also

have the potential to generate new vulnerabilities, and to precipitate social harm. As social media becomes ever more central in the lives of young people, it's important for us to understand the consequences of our design choices — both the ones that we intend, and the ones that we may not.

There are two sets of implications that I'd like to highlight. First, this research contributes to research on identity-based social movements, and how digital contexts can help members of marginalized communities to unite and mobilize together. While many have explored the utility of social media within the context of social movements, there remains a great deal of uncertainty regarding the function of these spaces and the precise nature of their impacts (Khazraee & Novak 2018). In particular, much remains unknown about whether social media platforms ultimately serve to *motivate* collective action, or to break users into factions that *inhibit* collective action. Conflict over membership, boundaries, and naming are endemic to all identity-based movements, and it is little surprise to see those conflicts emerge here (Gamson 1995). Studying the Internet as a particular *context* for those conflicts, however, enables us to see how the structure and organization of social media platforms themselves can temper or exacerbate these conflicts. If social media is to serve as a foundational driver for mobilizing identity-based movements (both TNB+-focused and otherwise), it is critical for sociologists to make sense of the structural factors that facilitate or inhibit this kind of mobilization. Illuminating the paradoxical nature of some of these factors — their potential both to create, and to destroy — constitutes an important first step in this direction.

Callouts and cancellations serve a valuable function in these protected spaces. Even when these tools are wielded against members of the same community, their exercise is an exercise of power: these are tools meant to defend public security, to promote the pursuit of justice, and to expand community members' agency. "Safe spaces" come few and far between for TNB+ young

people, and calling out participant misbehavior can help to keep online communities safe (as well as making them more inclusive). In this sense, affording users the tools to engage in this kind of accountability praxis is a critical component of *empowering* the young people who frequent these spaces, and of helping to defend young people against social harm. *Eliminating* identity challenges and callouts outright is an unrealistic aspiration (and, indeed, given the role that such challenges play in protecting community welfare, an *undesirable* one to boot).

Yet, at the same time, leaning *too* heavily upon this kind of accountability praxis can serve to undermine the same safety and inclusivity that such tools are implemented to defend. The architects of tomorrow's "safe spaces" -- both those contracted to design and build them, and those that volunteer to lead them -- should attend carefully to the duality of these affordances in their design choices, that we might avoid perpetuating harm to TNB+ young people in the same digital spaces that propose to serve and uplift them.

CHAPTER 8: NOW YOU SEE ME, NOW YOU DON'T: STIGMATIZED IDENTITY DISCLOSURE IN DIGITAL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

It has become commonplace for qualitative methodologists to recruit research participants and collect data online (Upadhyay and Lipkovich 2020; Murthy 2008). As greater numbers of researchers embrace remote recruitment and data collection in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become even more urgent for us to understand the promises and pitfalls of online recruitment and data collection, both for prospective participants and for researchers themselves. While extant literature has attended to some of the ways that online recruitment and data collection shapes our engagement with research participants (Barratt and Maddox 2016; Boydell et al 2014; Garcia et al 2009; Murthy 2008), one area that has yet to receive much analytic attention is the ways in which the terms of *disclosure* in the field -- in particular, the disclosure of stigmatized identities and experiences -- may be shaped by virtual contexts. The process of disclosure itself operates differently in digital spaces, and the terms of disclosure in digital environments carry important implications for online recruitment and data collection (for researchers with stigmatizable identities, most of all).

As digital recruitment has become more common, access to prospective participants for many types of projects has increased -- and participants' access to us has increased in kind. The advent of social media has made it far easier for us to gain insight into participants' lives, particularly when social networking sites themselves are used to connect and communicate with respondents; it has also made it far easier for them to keep track of *us*, and to follow us over time.

Social media and search engine technologies have done much to democratize the research process, offering our participants access to our personal lives (Saltmarsh 2013; Reich 2014). These tools allow participants to hold us accountable for our findings, and give them a platform to challenge our interpretations of the data collected (Reich 2014; Jerolmack and Murphy 2019). They also afford the possibility of longitudinal follow-up and relationship-building (enhancing the potential for community-driven project development, collaboration with participants in analysis and writing, etc.). While participants' ability to "research" us does not ameliorate *all* (or even most) of the power imbalance and potential for exploitation embedded in the research process, it does take promising steps in this direction, offering participants tools that they can use to make sense of our intentions, to engage with the research process as it unfolds, and to challenge the project's findings (even well after the formal research process has concluded). However, these shifts also introduce new challenges and considerations for sociologists -- and not just for those conducting research online.

The challenge I focus on in this chapter is how the Internet changes the process of building rapport with our participants -- especially when it comes to disclosing shared stigmatized identities. With the Internet, participants can now research us ahead of the interview session, reading and assessing our prior work, and trying to interpret our overarching research agendas (Reich 2014; Jerolmack and Murphy 2019). They make decisions about whether or not to participate based not on what we tell them in recruitment materials, but instead on what they're able to find out about the project -- and about us -- online. For those who research stigmatized communities, the potential for participants to "research the researcher" (Campbell 2001) introduces both opportunities and risks. Members of stigmatized communities often express a greater willingness to participate in research when they know that the researchers themselves are

“insiders,” drawn from the same communities (Rosenberg and Tilley 2020; Hayfield and Huxley 2015; Chavez 2008; Coghlan 2007; LaSala 2003). But to ensure that prospective participants are aware of this prior to the first meeting, it’s necessary to *disclose* these identities -- and, within the context of online recruitment and data collection, generally not to participants directly, but instead more publicly on the Web.

This is an aspect of the research process in which novice ethnographers are seldom guided by the IRB, or by other mentors in the academy (at least, in cases where mentors are not themselves members of these shared identity groups -- more likely to be true than false, given the ongoing, systemic inequities that continue to pervade academe). Instead, scholars are left to make their *own* determinations about how public they ought to be about their identities. How we navigate these decisions has implications not only for the success of our research, but also for the development of our careers, and for our relationships with others in the academy. Researchers who share stigmatized identities with their participants face a double-bind when recruiting online, wherein disclosing to would-be participants also means disclosing to peers (with unpredictable, often permanent consequences). In this chapter, I use my experiences collecting data from trans and gender non-conforming young people to talk through some of the challenges of managing identity disclosure in virtual worlds. I then assess some of the implications of these challenges, both for our research practice and for researchers’ trajectories outside of the field.

Shared Identities in the Qualitative Research Encounter

Qualitative methodologists have generally concurred that the cultivation of participants’ *trust* can enhance data collection (Hayfield and Huxley 2015; Reich 2014; Bucerius 2013; Lincoln 2010; Mazzei and O’Brien 2009; Chavez 2008; Perry et al 2004; Harrison et al 2001). The quality of the data collected during interviews or “sessions in the field” often hinges -- at least in part --

upon the rapport that researchers build with their participants, and the level of access and engagement that participants provide based on this rapport. While some (for example, Blee 1998; Bucerius 2013) have argued that the cultivation of rapport is not *de facto necessary* to the success of research -- including research on closed or stigmatized communities -- even these scholars have generally concluded that trust is *beneficial* to the research encounter. For example, while Blee's reflections (1998) on her fieldwork with Ku Klux Klan members and neo-Nazis build a strong case for preserving emotional detachment from one's participants (both for the sake of maintaining one's emotional well-being, and to evade participant manipulation), Blee also acknowledges that "methodological principles based on trust and rapport are...useful as safeguards for the integrity and accuracy of narratives of participants with whom scholars share some level of common experience" (1998, p. 388). In essence, Blee suggests that trust and rapport prove most generative within the context of "insider" research: research where researchers share core identities, perspectives, or roles with their informants.

One of the major arguments advanced in favor of "insider" ethnography (Rosenberg and Tilley 2020; Veletsianos and Stewart 2016; Hayfield & Huxley 2015; Harris 2015; Voloder & Kirpitchenko 2013; LaSala 2003; Bridges 2001) is that researchers who share identities and experiences with their participants collect richer data. For example, Hayfield and Huxley (2015) argue that "insider" status stands to benefit researchers across all stages of the research process, aiding not only in the analysis and interpretation of findings but also in the development of research questions, accessing and recruiting potential participants, and disseminating findings to the populations concerned in the research. "Insiders" are attuned to dynamics and mechanisms operating in participants' lives that might escape the attention of "outside" observers (Bridges 2001) and are motivated to center participants' voices, positioning their contributions to the

communities under study at the top of the research agenda (LaSala 2003). “Insiders” may also be better positioned to *give back* to the communities and individuals they research (Coghlan 2007) -- a stronger motivation, potentially, for those who hold such insider status, and one reason why insiders may choose to practice or conduct research in the communities to which they belong (Taylor 2011; Mayrl and Westbrook 2009; Jacobs-Huey 2002). Participants may also perceive the motives of “inside” researchers to be “purer” -- they may perceive them as allies, or interpret them as less likely to leverage the findings of the research maliciously. Participants may form greater rapport with the researcher based on their perceived similarities (or on the assumption of shared experiences), and this rapport can lead participants to feel more at ease and to share in more detail during the research encounter (Nelson 2020; Watts 2006; Perry et al 2004).

Reflexive questions surrounding identity disclosure in the field have also long been of interest to feminist ethnographers, who have committed significant energy to unpacking tensions around positionality and power in the research encounter (Ali 2015; Oakley 1981). This body of scholarship has argued that field research — and, in particular, field research with marginalized populations — is by a *vulnerable* process for both observer and observed, requiring researchers to think critically about the power and authority that they command relative to their participants, and how this power dynamic changes what might otherwise be understood as a relationship of “equals” (members of the same social community). By remaining conscious of these dynamics throughout the research process — and, in many cases, well after data collection itself is complete — researchers promote transparency, and help to minimize the potential for exploitation (Pillow 2003). When we offer mutual disclosure to our research participants, we help to “equalize” the terms of the research encounter, demonstrating that we’re willing to reciprocate their trust (Nelson 2020).

Of course, “insider” status can carry its own liabilities, as many qualitative researchers have well attested. For one, while the extant literature has often framed the insider/outsider dichotomy as a binary one, it is seldom that researchers share in *all* aspects of their participants’ identities (Nelson 2020; Breen 2007; Bridges 2001). Surely, this has proven to be the case for me in conducting my own “insider” research. As a queer, trans man, many of my research participants interpreted me as an “insider” with respect to my status as LGBTQ. As a social media user -- someone that demonstrated familiarity with the memes and group names they invoked in our interview sessions -- they often classified me as “one of their own.” Having accessed medical transition, I was uniquely positioned to explore these issues with other participants that had medically transitioned, who could debrief on their experiences without fear of judgment (and without having to fill me in, for instance, on the difference between estradiol and spironolactone, or the traits that distinguish the six-plus forms of masculinizing chest reconstruction currently available to TNB+ men).

In spite of this shared background, however, the differences between us were equally profound. As a binary-aligned trans person, I have limited experience with many of the online social spaces geared towards non-binary young people. Non-binary participants sometimes disclosed their anxiety about how I may be reading or interpreting them. (As Milo (21, he/they) joked at the outset of his interview -- half-laughing, half-anxious -- “you’re not truscum, are you?”) In addition, while my participants and I were fairly close in age -- I was 30 at the time that data collection began, meaning that the age gap between my participants and I spanned 12 years at most (and only five years, at the least) -- the generational divide between us was nevertheless significant, *especially* given the project’s focus on social media use. Born in 1987, I was one of the first to come of age as a “digital native”; we didn’t have Internet access at home until I was 13, and I

joined my first social media platform (MySpace) at 18. My participants, by contrast, were born between the years 1993 and 2000; many created their first social media accounts in elementary school (often breaking age guidelines set by their platforms of choice in order to do so). While my participants and I had all “grown up” with social media, I found that their use often varied from my own, focusing their attention on different features (like the Instagram “Stories” feature), different areas of particular platforms (like Facebook’s “tag groups”), or sometimes even different platforms altogether (such as Discord or TikTok -- both wildly popular options that were wholly unknown to me at the project’s outset). Whether we share some elements of “insider” status with our participants or not, we must resist the temptation to assume that *because* we share experiences with our respondents, we also afford a uniquely penetrating *insight* into those experiences. Nor should we believe that sharing a subject position with our respondents frees us of the obligation to interrogate our own positionality (Sheldon 2017).

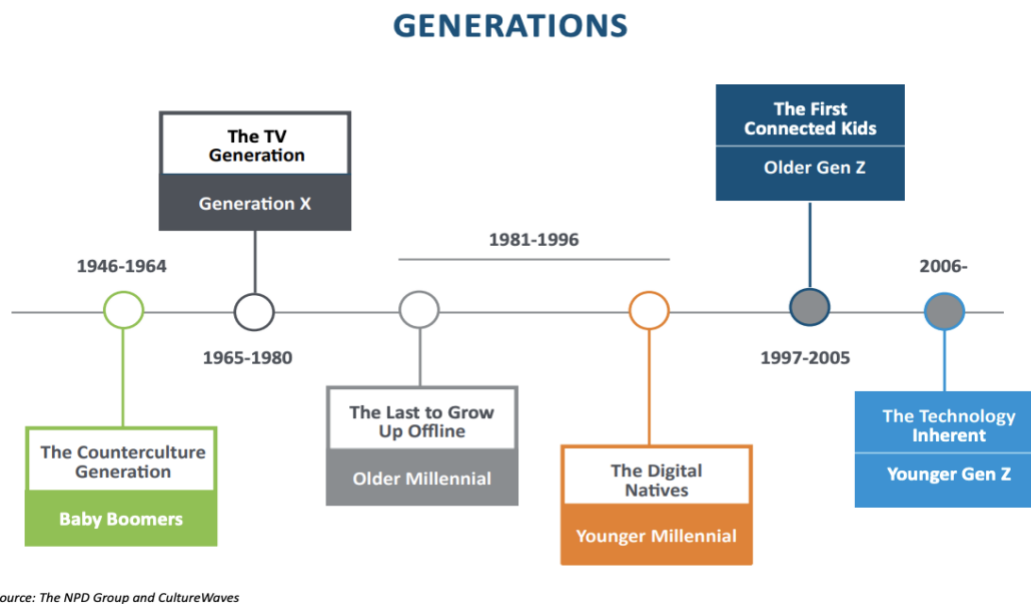


Figure 8.1: The timeline above showcases generational divides, with respect to particular technological transitions. (NPD Group 2021)

Still others have argued that “outsider” perspectives may offer benefits that transcend those afforded by insider status. Some, for example, have suggested that “insider” ethnographers may struggle to cultivate detachment and objectivity in their findings (Bucerius 2013; Chavez 2008; Hellowell 2006). In addition, while achieving “insider” status can provide increased access to privileged knowledge (and to key informants), it also has the potential to provoke role conflict (Bucerius 2013; Brannick & Coghlan 2007) and to create confusion regarding the researcher’s obligations to participants, particularly over time (Stacey 1988; Coffey 1999). However, in this case -- as discussed previously, in Chapter 2 -- I believe that the benefits of my (partial) insider status helped to outweigh the risks. While it is true that my status has rendered my relationship with my participants more analytically complex, I believe --- as discussed previously, in Chapter 2 -- that the benefits of my (partial) insider status have offered gains here that outweigh the possible risks (particularly risks to “objectivity,” which -- as many know -- is difficult, and perhaps even impossible, to cultivate in sociological research, including research leveraging quantitative or survey-based methods). Sharing one or more identities with one’s participants is often viewed as productive for the research encounter (and for the comfort and well-being of participants), regardless of whether or not researchers can “truly” be perceived as “insiders” in the communities under study, or of whether one’s status as “insider” carries its own methodological burdens and risks.

“Insiders” that hold socially stigmatized identities thus have an important role to play in conducting qualitative research with stigmatized participants. Rosenberg and Tilley (2020) find that this may hold to be *particularly* true of trans scholars conducting research with other trans people. As they write:

For trans people, documenting and disseminating experiences is an inseparable aspect of how knowledge is shared between and within communities...in the realm of trans research, this means that trans people should ideally be included throughout a project, from inception to dissemination...[they] carry with them a deep understanding of trans history, a nuanced understanding of trans-related language, an inroad to trans spaces, and other factors that are crucial to constructive and culturally appropriate trans research.

Trans people are few in number (James et al 2016) and often difficult to recruit, both due to their relative scarcity and due to skepticism about researchers' intentions (Hayfield & Huxley 2015; Harrison-Quintana et al 2015) or generalized research fatigue (Ashley 2021; Glick et al 2018; Clark 2008). Hayfield and Huxley (2015), for instance, find that "LGBT people may consider researchers to be an intrusion unless that researcher is a member of their community, or shares their identity, and is therefore more likely to be considered trustworthy in their motives" (see also Rosenberg and Tilley 2020). Interactions with my own participants seemed to bear this out, with several participants acknowledging that they would not have knowingly contributed to a project headed by a cisgender faculty member. Rigby (23, he/they), for instance, was frank and explicit about his distrust of cis interlocutors, and elaborated on the sources of this distrust at some length in his interview:

I really don't want cis people in my trans spaces, at all...I'm really distrustful of people, and I really want to be around *just* trans people, if I'm gonna talk about trans stuff...I know that, like, cis people are gonna find a way to think that, like, I've been coerced by the establishment, or I'm just being difficult, or I'm mentally ill...there's just, like, a million pitfalls with cis people where, like, I don't trust them with trans stuff at all. I think they should read the paper when it's done, but I don't want them doing the methodology. I don't want them asking the questions, because I don't think they're going to ask the right ones. Um, and I don't think that, as a group, trans people are excited to share, like, stuff about their, like, selves with cis people, because...I think we have been tied to 'born this way,' 'wrong body' stuff, in part because we want to make it as simple as possible for them. And I don't want to open the door and say, 'it's actually a hot mess in there. Like, there's all kinds of shit going on.' Like, I will -- at this point, I'll just *let* people think that my body is 'wrong,' unless I get a chance to discuss it with them, and I trust them. Like, I -- I think

there's a pressure to present, like, a unified front, I think -- and if there's a cis person asking, I think trans people would try to present, like, you know -- kind of, like, a 'Family Feud'-type answer, the way all the other trans people are gonna answer, so that we can legitimize ourselves. And I don't feel like I need to legitimize myself to another trans person.

Rigby's reflection here raises a number of separate concerns, each with their own methodological implications. For one, it suggests that the long history of research-based pathologization of trans experiences, appropriation of trans folks' experiences for nefarious philosophical or political purpose, and misinterpretation or mischaracterization of those experiences (even by cis people that are otherwise well-informed and well-intentioned) have done much to shape perceptions of the research process among trans and non-binary people. It also speaks to the role that trans and non-binary research participants might play in *shaping* these misinterpretations (e.g., by providing 'Family Feud'-style responses instead of candid ones; by allowing a researcher to project their own interpretations or framings (like the assumption that trans people perceive their bodies as "wrong") without intervening to correct them; etc.). In this sense, skepticism of cis-het researchers has the potential to create a kind of ouroboros wherein trans people, fearing misrepresentation or abuse by cis researchers, provide inauthentic or stereotyped answers to questions in an effort to *avoid* misrepresentation, only to ultimately retrench and *extend* researchers' misperceptions. Building trans and non-binary interviewers or community partners into the research process can help to disrupt this feedback loop, improving the fidelity of findings (and without displacing cis scholars from the research process wholesale).

Others -- while less emphatic than Rigby -- voiced similar concerns, noting that while they would still have participated in research spearheaded by a cis P.I., knowing my status helped them to feel more engaged in the research process. Malachi (20, he/they), for instance, explained that the research incentive played a major role in his decision to take part, saying, "I was ready to do

it, but I wouldn't have been, like, interested...if I didn't know that the person who, like, I was contributing to [was] trans. I just signed up because I was, like, 'this is \$100, and, like, I don't really care who conducts the interview.' But...[now], I'm, like, actually committed. Like, you know -- I'm engaged. I'm excited for you to be doing this." Cameron (22, they/them), too, explained that knowing my status helped the research encounter to feel more affirming:

I think -- I think I still would, you know, allow this much openness to a cis person. I'd like to think so, at least...[but] I definitely do feel, like, a lot better knowing that you're trans. I mean, like, a LOT better...especially because you openly *tell* me that you identify with a lot of these experiences...I feel like there's a certain amount of, like, self-diagnosed psychosis that a lot of us have, where [we're] like, 'oh God,' like -- 'how much of this experience am I, like, coming up with myself?'

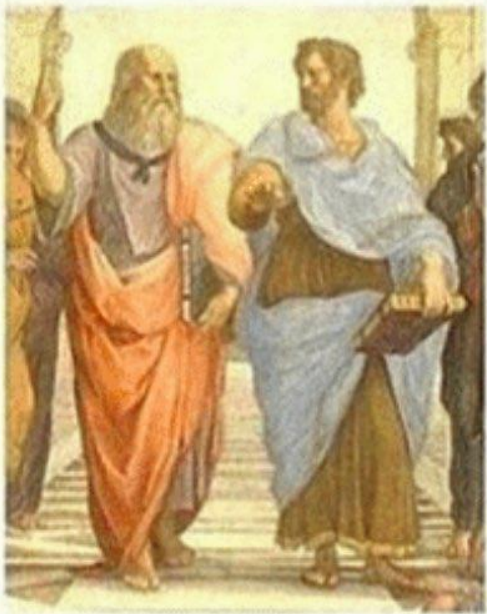
Cameron's response speaks to another important component of LGBTQ identity disclosure within the research encounter: here, sharing identities helps participants to feel not only *understood* by their interlocutors, but also *validated* in their identities, in the same ways that they might feel encountering another trans person's narrative online. Most qualitative researchers are not therapists (and the research encounter is certainly not -- and *should not* be -- considered "therapy"), but nevertheless, holding space for participants and affirming their experiences can nevertheless be *therapeutic* for research respondents, enabling them to feel less alone. While cis ethnographers are undoubtedly capable of affirming participants and helping them to feel heard, such affirmation carries a different valence when it comes from someone that has "walked the walk." By openly disclosing our identities and perceptions to participants, we have the potential to help develop participants' confidence and to improve their self-concept -- contributions that can benefit participants well after the research process has formally concluded.

Finally -- and as the preceding chapters have surely attested -- effective participation in majority-TNB+ spaces (particularly online) requires command of a specific vocabulary, rife with

rapidly-changing jargon and specialized terminology. Developing a sense of the ‘language’ of trans spaces can present a significant barrier to entry for cis researchers (and, moreover, a barrier that cis researchers may not readily perceive). Some participants, like Kai (22, they/she/he), spoke to the disjuncture this seemed to introduce into their interactions with cis people:

Like, the cis don't really, like -- they don't keep up with [this] stuff. They're not thinking, like -- it's just some weird Internet [stuff] on 4Chan, or something...they're, like, in the '80s, still. They think trans people are like *Ru Paul's Drag Race*, still. They don't know anything...Have you seen that meme, where it's, like, 'talking to cis people about gender,' and then it has someone, like, playing with blocks like a baby -- you know the one? [Interviewer: Yeah!] ...Yeah, exactly -- that's my life. [laughing]

Talking about gender with trans people vs.



Talking about gender with cis people

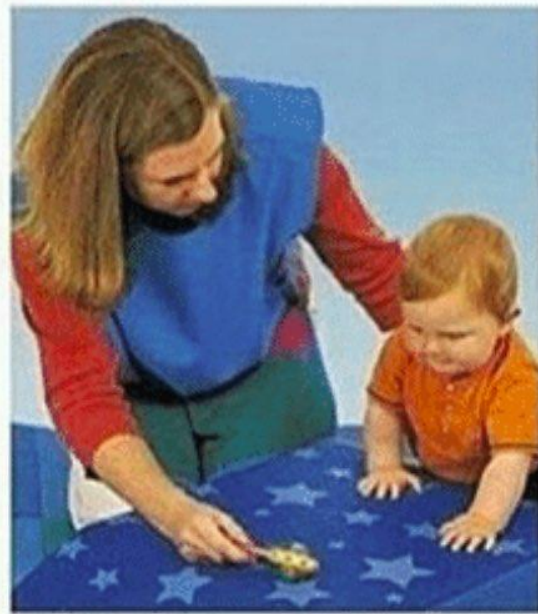


Figure 8.2: The popular meme shown above -- frequently recirculated in trans-focused spaces online -- attests to the ease of communication that some trans people experience in their conversations with other trans people. (@zooblade 2019)

Taken together, these reflections make the case that trans researchers should be integrally involved in the study of trans people, and across all phases of the research process. They also testify to the benefits of cultivating transparency with participants, particularly with respect to shared identity and experiences. Disclosing these areas of experiential overlap yields dividends not only within the context of the research encounter, but also beyond it.

Understanding Disclosure in the Digital Age

As the data presented above suggest, being perceived as an “insider” can yield interactional dividends. However, it must be recognized that participants can only perceive researchers as “insiders” once they have disclosed their identities in the field. “Disclosure” in qualitative research can take a variety of forms, and doesn’t always hinge upon direct verbal pronouncements. Symbolic interactionists have already well-established that we rely upon a range of social cues -- some verbal, some non-verbal; some related to presentation of self, some related to setting or context, and so on (Goffman 1959) -- to make sense of others’ identities. As researchers, we might attempt to convey our identities to participants through different hairstyles or styles of dress, by using accents or slang terms, adopting a particular kind of posture or body language, or deploying other strategies, relying on this visual “signposting” (Wolowic et al 2017) to communicate our status. At the same time, participants take these signals -- along with an array of other signals we’ve given off, both intentional and unintended (Goffman 1963) -- and leverage them to make sense of who we are. Participants scrutinize us during the research encounter, returning their own variation on the “research gaze” (Meadow 2013), and can use this gaze to inform their perceptions of us -- particularly with respect to identities or experiences that we may share in kind.

In research conducted prior to the era of social media, these moments of “disclosure” -- whether verbal, or nonverbal -- most often took place within the bounds of the research encounter itself. They typically took place during an interview, focus group, or field site visit, often in a one-on-one or small-group context, and away from the public view. Today’s digitally-mediated landscape, however, has altered the context within which these disclosures unfold. Online, information about us is more readily accessible to participants, and -- just as in the face-to-face contexts described above -- appears in a variety of different forms, including both overt identity disclosures (for example, links to our home institutions, or to social media pages where we’ve “outed” our identities) and indirect disclosures (like those that can be inferred through our personal networks, our group memberships, topics that we’ve “liked” or “followed” on social media, and so on). It has become routine for participants to actively seek out this information by “researching the researcher” (Campbell 2001), Googling us ahead of time or looking up information about our previous work to try to make sense of our agendas (Saltmarsh 2013; Reich 2014). Trans and gender non-conforming social media users are uniquely positioned to take on this task, as they are both social media-savvy and accustomed to parsing indirect or nonverbal gender cues (including those that may signal trans identity). Prior research on trans youth has suggested that these participants are often quite capable of “reading between the lines” to infer researcher identity (Sumerau and Mathers 2019), relying on cultural cues similar to those leveraged in studies of “gaydar” (Barton 2015). Even things as innocuous as our names might be framed as signaling our identities, as participant Malachi (20, he/they) suggested in his interview:

Malachi: I was preparing for [this interview] to just be, like, a shitty, boring kind of thing. But then I think, like -- see, your name was Spencer, and I was like ‘okay, maybe...’ And then I, like, looked you up?...I was ready to do [the interview], but...I wouldn’t have been, like, [as] interested in engaging in a conversation if I didn’t think that the person who I was contributing to, like, was trans.

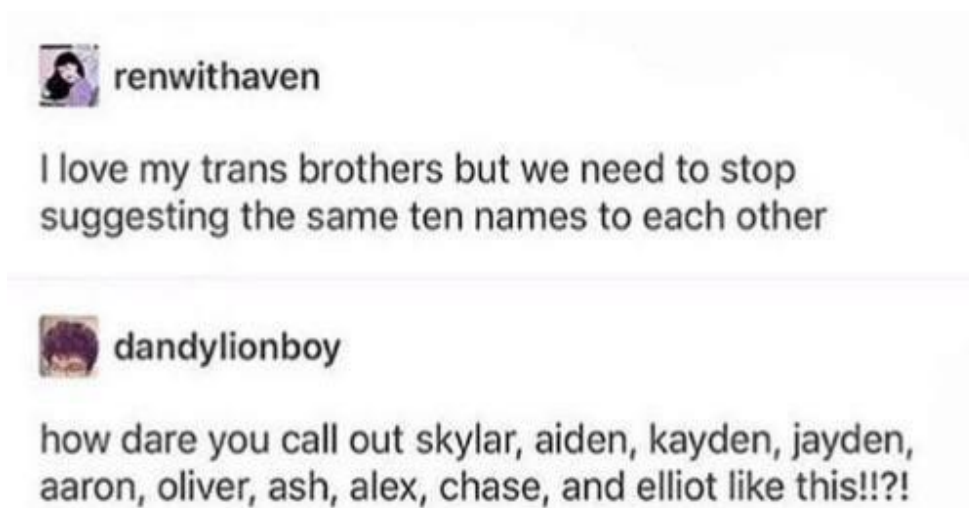


Figure 8.3: Some common names are disproportionately popular among trans men -- a signal that some trans men might leverage to interpellate others' identities. (dandyliionboy 2018)

Within the context of “insider” research -- where participants and their interlocutors share a common language, knowledge base, and cultural tool kit -- this kind of “signposting” can be a useful tool, both for would-be participants and for researchers themselves. But at the same time, not *every* prospective participant is prepared (or willing) to do this kind of digging to infer a researcher’s intentions -- and if one’s identity and intentions aren’t rendered sufficiently transparent, participants may be deterred.

A moment of identity challenge that occurred early on in my recruitment process brought this reality into sharp focus for me. As I embarked on this project, I was already attuned to the idea that insider-outsider dynamics played an important role in shaping the conversation between researchers and participants. I was also keenly aware that my own positionality was likely to be a subject of curiosity and concern. At the time, newly out as a trans man and still pre-HRT, my physical presentation felt muddled and ambiguous — I was visibly gender non-conforming, with a name and pronouns that didn’t yet align with my physique. While this had proven disruptive in

my day-to-day interactions with cis people, I hoped that my participants might interpret this ambiguity differently, using it to establish my status as an “insider” or as “wise” (Goffman 1963). I had few reservations about being “out” to my participants — indeed, as I developed my recruitment strategy, I deliberately rendered myself and my intentions as transparently to my participants as I could.

However, at the time, my ability to be “out” and transparent about my identity in the field was complicated by the intricacies of my own social transition. As a first-year graduate student, I was wary of the potential for context collapse (boyd 2014) online. New to grad school and to academic research, I wasn’t yet sure whether I wanted to be out to unknown colleagues, or whether I wanted my professional identity to be so closely imbricated with my identity as a trans person. Others in my department reassured me that I was right to tread cautiously here — that it would be a professional liability, in some ways, to present myself as “too close” to my work, or as a one-trick pony only interested in “me-search” (Schilt 2018). Describing myself openly as a trans man on social media or on my professional home page had the potential to impact my professional networks and my career trajectory in ways I couldn’t yet (and, indeed, can’t now!) fully anticipate. Networks outside of the academy complicated the picture still further — while out as trans to others in my program and in my life in Ann Arbor, I hadn’t yet come out to family or friends from home (many of whom, of course, were connected to me on Facebook). I wanted to render myself visible to potential participants as a trans person, without actually putting my identity into words online.

To do this, I developed a recruitment web page that I linked to my own professional WordPress homepage, making it easy for would-be participants to access my academic credentials, my CV, and descriptions of my prior work. I was also careful to include photos of myself, both on

the WordPress page I set up for recruitment and on my personal website. I connected my Facebook page to my personal website, offering another route to information: participants could, in theory, click through to my Facebook account, where (even as non-“friends”) they would be able to view dozens of previous profile images and cover photos. They would also be able to access and review a selection of older photos, if they so desired, which would offer more tangible evidence of my evolving presentation. In addition to photos, this Facebook link offered participants access to other information about my identity and interests — they could, for instance, review my timeline and see that I was affiliated with my campus’s graduate certificate program in LGBTQ Studies, or that I had volunteered with the LGBTQ resource center on campus.

As noted above, those who identify as LGBTQ may have more experience than some other observers in “reading between the lines,” imputing queer or trans identity to others based on visual and social cues that might otherwise be considered subtle (Hughes 2018; Sumerau & Mathers 2019). As I composed my recruitment materials, I anticipated that my participants would attempt to “read between” my own representations of self in this way. It was initially quite surprising, then, to find that within 15 minutes of posting my first call for participants (on a small, explicitly trans-focused message board), I had received a direct message from an anonymous user bearing the headline “CIS GO HOME.” The text of the message read simply, “We are not your social experiment.” Taken aback, I sent a response to the user, explaining that I too identified as trans and offering additional information about my interests and motives, trying to further contextualize why I’d launched the project and what I was hoping to gain. There was no reply.

When we fail to disclose our identities *proactively* in the field, we foreclose the possibility of connecting with participants skeptical of “outsiders” (or even just wary of contributing insights to projects *headed* by outsiders, which can carry major risks -- in terms of the potential for public

misrepresentation, etc. -- while often returning little in the way of practical value to community members). As such -- and appropriately -- if participants miss (or challenge) a researcher's identity cues, the risks can be high. Participants can discredit their interlocutors (publicly, or even directly to other potential respondents) if they find their intentions questionable or their transparency insufficient. These critiques can diffuse quickly in online contexts and can have a more pervasive, longer-lasting impact than word of mouth alone (Reich 2014). I feel fortunate to have escaped such a fate, and believe that my subsequent decision to "out" my identity even more clearly to prospective recruits played a fundamental role in helping to evade this outcome. Following this interaction, I immediately added a self-disclosure statement identifying myself as trans to the call for recruitment, and to a post stickied to the top of the Facebook page I'd designed to promote the project. A few weeks later, I added a similar nod to the summary of my research on my personal website -- the same website I knew would be scrutinized by university hiring committees, if and when I entered the academic job market.

The above account suggests that the most efficient and effective way to make yourself known to participants as an insider is to disclose identity unambiguously as early on in the research process as possible. However, when recruiting through social media or other online venues, the affordances of these digital environments change the context within which such disclosures are made. The online context raises questions about when and how this disclosure should ideally take place. Given that many prospective recruits may hold skepticism about participating in projects spearheaded by "outsiders," it would seem that disclosure should ideally be offered at the time of *recruitment*, rather than at the time of data collection. However, for those leveraging digital recruitment methods, that means these disclosures must be made more publicly -- and, just as importantly, they need to be offered to strangers (whose intentions can't be known). This need for

public disclosure can have dramatic implications for researchers themselves, who might be asked to choose between enhancing recruitment or rapport with participants and jeopardizing or complicating other relationships in their lives.

This is, ironically, *especially* the case for researchers studying communities that are stigmatized -- the more stigmatized the community, the more skeptical members are apt to be of “outsiders,” and the more likely disclosure of insider status is to yield rich insights. But when researchers belong to stigmatized communities, the risks of disclosure are higher -- particularly for scholars early in their careers. The consequences of these disclosures -- whether offered, or withheld -- shape not only experiences in the field, but also (potentially) interactions with family members, peers, colleagues, and actors entirely unknown. To claim “insider” status, researchers must make themselves visible online in ways that may not be wholly comfortable (or even safe), given the potential for context collapse and the “permanent” nature of such disclosures when made in virtual spaces. What happens in the research context thus carries implications not only for the conduct or the product of our research, but for our professional lives, our personal lives, and our lives out in the aether of the Web.

Conclusion

The question of whether to disclose one’s identities and experiences -- particularly stigmatized ones -- online is an important consideration for qualitative methodologists. The choices we make have implications for rapport-building with our respondents, but they also have the potential to influence relationships with colleagues, peers, and family members outside of the academe. To be accepted as credible by my own research participants, I needed to “out” myself to them, rendering myself visible as a trans person -- but this held implications for my personal life and for my professional trajectory that were difficult to reconcile. Cultivating trust and rapport

with our participants demands vulnerability, and the cultivation of this trust is no longer context-limited, bound to the interview rooms or field sites where research is being conducted. With the aid of technology, it seeps and bleeds into other domains of our lives. While it could be argued that self-disclosures can *still* be reserved for the research context, this decision inevitably informs our recruitment process and shapes the pool of participants that we're able to reach.

Being perceived as “authentic” online means *proactively* disclosing information about the self *ahead* of the research encounter. These disclosures are made in a context teeming with complications. It's difficult to control the spread of information online (and to control its longevity). It's also difficult to control your potential audience -- which, online, and particularly within the context of research, is likely to include colleagues and faculty members at other universities. Proactively disclosing information about stigmatized identities online can have implications for one's career trajectory. For instance, recent survey data collected by the American Sociological Association's “Sociologists for Trans Justice” caucus -- drawn from a survey conducted in 2018, the same year that data collection for my dissertation began -- found that more than half (54%) of trans and gender non-conforming graduate students in sociology did not feel safe or supported at ASA, or at other major academic conferences (Wilkinson et al 2019). Nearly a quarter (21%) reported receiving invasive or unnecessary commentary about their trans status from other conference attendees at ASA (Wilkinson et al 2019). A separate report finds that more than 40% of academics identifying as LGBTQ have not disclosed their identity to colleagues, for fear of harassment or workplace discrimination (Yoder & Mattheis 2016).

Career trajectories can be reshaped even in situations where outright harassment is absent. Colleagues need not cut off your bathroom access or spray-paint your office door with slurs in order to impede your rise in the academy -- particularly when the “me-search” problem can do this

for you. Being labeled as one-note (or, worse still, as biased) can make one appear less attractive as a colleague even in cases where one's underlying identity is unknown. As always, the decision of whether or not to disclose takes place within a context of structural inequality that transcends the actions and intentions of any individual scholar or group.) And importantly, the same social forces that contribute to this apprehension about employability incentivize researchers to remain silent about their experiences, meaning that such experiences are generally left out of field notes and research reports (and, thus, effectively decried as terrain for analysis in their own right).

How can my experiences in the field contribute to the (already sizable) corpus of work on positionality and disclosure in qualitative research? For one, my experiences demonstrate that the Internet is now an incontrovertible part of the ethnographic "field" (whether we're doing "online research" or not), and that we are being evaluated -- both with respect to gender presentation/performance, and with respect to other dimensions of our identities -- by participants all the time, with our knowledge and without. Today's ethnographers and interviewers must be attentive to this reality and to the impacts that it can have on the recruitment process, on rapport-building, and on the research encounter itself. We need to be conscious of how our participants are constructing us, using the materials accessible to them online -- and we need to be cognizant of where these materials are, how they can be accessed, and what they convey about our identities and intentions.

We ask a great deal of our participants when we invite them to tell us their deepest secrets. Without their trust, our research -- especially (and perhaps ironically) research involving our most vulnerable participants and most challenging topics -- can't progress. We owe *everything* to them, and as queer and feminist ethnographers have long attested, we don't always give back what we take. The Internet offers our participants a means to level the playing field (at least in part) by giving them tools to 'check up' on us, and to follow up on our work and its reception; it also helps

them to ‘research’ us ahead of time, and to assess our intentions. It gives them new tools with which to hold us *accountable*, both for our actual conduct and for our intentions/beliefs.

It’s important for us to reciprocate our participants’ trust in us by remaining accountable to them, showing *through action* that we have endeavored to empower and uplift them (rather than to misrepresent them, or to appropriate their experiences). Yet, the increasing digital mediation of the research process is changing the terms of this engagement. The delicate trade-offs this new context demands -- learning how to weigh transparency against safety, vulnerability against the potential for exploitation, and so on -- offer fruitful methodological and theoretical terrain for qualitative researchers to excavate.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have analyzed the role that today’s online communities and social media platforms play in organizing the identity projects of TNB+ young people. Findings presented in the previous chapters suggest these spaces are tremendously influential, serving as hubs of self-exploration where youth can “test out” new modes of self-presentation, learn from the experiences of other young trans and gender non-conforming people, and engage in practices that challenge the existing gender order. However, while these spaces hold great promise and value, they can also be sources of anxiety, harassment, and risk for TNB+ youth. In this final chapter, I review some of the implications of these findings, connecting them to extant debates (theoretical, practical, and philosophical) in the fields of sociology and information science. I also attend to some of the *limitations* of the work, closing with some recommendations for further research.

* * *

Back in Chapter 1, I explored participants’ reactions to the theories advanced by Lisa Littman (2018) and Abigail Shrier (2020): in particular, the claims that contemporary teens and young adults perceive TNB+ identities to be “cool” or “trendy,” and that social media is promoting the adoption of such identities via a mechanism of “social contagion” (Littman 2018). Social contagion itself has been advanced as a possible explanation for everything from suicidality and self-harm (Jarvi et al 2013) to smoking (Christakis & Fowler 2008) and obesity (Christakis & Fowler 2007). Inasmuch as sociologists have suggested that interactional, environmental, and institutional factors play a role in shaping social behavior, sociologists can also be said to have

offered some support for this idea (Balbo & Barban 2020; Zhang & Centola 2019; Shalizi & Thomas 2012; Myers 2000). However, sociologists have also been clear in attending to the dynamic role that *individual* preferences play in shaping such processes. For instance, network theorist Ronald Burt (1987) critiqued arguments emphasizing the role of “social contagion” in technological innovation, arguing that -- while some evidence did support the idea of “diffusion” of ideas among research personnel, in the sense that similar organizational positions tended to make similar behavioral choices -- personal preferences played just as great a role in shaping behavior. Lactera and colleagues (2014) similarly conclude that homophily between actors (that is, shared social identity and shared structural positions -- played a greater role in facilitating diffusion than “genuine social contagion effects” (p. 3). Shalizi and Thomas (2011) argue that this conflation of homophily with contagion dynamics represents a broader pattern in sociological research, demonstrating that “these are confounded with each other...[such that] very simple models of imitation (a form of social contagion) can produce substantial correlations between an individual’s enduring traits and his or her choices, even when there is no intrinsic affinity between them” (p. 211). Liebst (2019; p. 35) argues that this rejection of “contagion” approaches accords “with the growing insight that micro-sociology (Smith 2015) and social psychology (Swann and Jetten 2017) have overemphasized the ‘power of the situation’ at the expense of person-based influence and person-situation interactions (Fleeson & Nofle 2008).” As this corpus of literature suggests, determining the *causal* underpinnings or *directionality* of so-called “contagion” relationships can prove far more challenging than simply establishing that correlations exist. Their critiques exemplify the case against Littman (2018) and Shrier’s (2020) arguments regarding contagion: these arguments conflate contagion and homophily, failing to recognize the role of shared identity and shared experience in helping to draw TNB+ users together.

The evidence for “diffusion” or “contagion” suggested by my interviews is similarly mixed. While my participants acknowledged the role that social media had played in facilitating their exposure to information about TNB+ identities (and, thus, in some cases, in shaping their perceptions of themselves as TNB+), they also suggested that awareness of their own “difference” often well preceded their entry into trans spaces online. My participants -- binary-aligned and non-binary alike -- generally framed their perceptions of their own gender identities as organic, “natural,” and guided by intuition; they often reported entering into TNB+ online spaces *looking* for answers to questions about gender they already had, or finding that their exposure to new identity descriptions affirmed experiences and feelings they had previously been unable to name. They also, however, affirmed the role that the Internet had played in helping them to *recognize* themselves as trans, and to explore their identities in ways that felt validating and safe. Although the Internet has certainly not “created” trans or non-binary people, it *has* given many TNB+ the tools that they’ve needed to self-actualize, and to render themselves visible to others in ways that analog contexts foreclose.

One core argument of this dissertation is that the Internet has helped to drive the *expansion* of trans identity -- to make trans identity (and also transition) accessible to those that may not have passed the muster of medical and psychiatric gatekeepers in the past. As Chapter 4 established, to be classified within the context of the extant, binary gender system as ‘trans,’ one is compelled to align with the “dominant narrative” of trans experience: a narrative centered around life-threatening dysphoria, a life-long time horizon for the awareness of one’s gender difference, and the desire to change one’s role (socially, through medical intervention, or both). Inability to satisfy medical or psychiatric gatekeepers has likely dissuaded many non-binary people in the past from pursuing transition or from coming out (presuming, of course, that they recognized or labeled their

own gender variance to begin with, given the literal “unthinkability” of non-binary identities as little as 10 years ago). As Chapter 4 explains, these anxieties have often rendered non-binary and gender-fluid people invisible to the public, inducing non-binary people to cling to binary narratives or binary signifiers in accounting for their gender experience in order to establish themselves as trans (even as they work to problematize characterizations of themselves as men or women).

I argue that social media has given TNB+ young people the tools that they need to begin to subvert “dominant” accounts of trans experience. As my participants -- and I -- have argued, the tendency for young TNB+ people to congregate in online communities is an effect of what these communities *afford* to young trans people. The widespread emergence of TNB+ youth today is (at least in part) attributable to the fact that the Internet has made gender exploration safer, easier, and more accessible. The features of these online spaces themselves offer young trans people powerful tools for privacy control, self-exploration, and identity management that aren’t accessible to them anywhere else. These spaces afford TNB+ youth opportunities to explore identity, try new modes of self-presentation, and to connect and share information with others that have walked in their shoes.

One way in which online spaces help to complicate dominant accounts of trans experience is by divesting gender attribution from the physical body. As I discuss in Chapter 5, in the body-centric culture of “meatspace,” gender attribution is a visual process; we classify others’ gender based on how they look, sound, and style their bodies (West & Zimmerman 1987). On the Internet, people both (A) have more control over how their bodies are represented and perceived (which can itself be empowering), and (B) have the option of visibly *labeling* their identities, which can help to prevent misrecognition. This can enable people to claim TNB+ identities when they might otherwise be publicly misrecognized or lapsed back into other (binary) gender categories based

upon their appearance. By making the labels that people use to describe their identities visible to the public (and also helping to publicize and to raise awareness of less recognized labels), social media platforms have enabled trans young people to make themselves known on a scale we haven't seen before.

Another way in which the Internet has helped users to challenge the “dominant narrative” of trans identity is by expanding the conversation about the role of *dysphoria* in anchoring trans experience. While a clinical diagnosis of gender dysphoria remains mandatory in many areas in order to access surgical interventions, those that aren't interested in surgery sometimes find that Internet access and social media alleviate their need to interface with medical personnel at all. As participant Sebastian (20, they/them) summarized, “I don't need a piece of paper to tell people that I'm non-binary, thanks.” In this sense, the Internet has made it possible for young people to *choose* trans identity, or to claim trans identity, even in the absence of life-threatening dysphoria.

The features of these online spaces that afford connection and new representational possibilities to trans young people have also contributed to the massive “concepto-lingual bloom” (Horncastle 2008) of gender and sexual identity labels over the past twenty years. Arguments on the contagion of TNB+ identities suggest that when users are exposed to novel identity labels online, the allure of “fun” and attention compels them to adopt such labels themselves (the so-called “special snowflake” argument -- see Tait 2017, Smyth 2017). However, my participants suggest a different narrative. In Chapter 6, I have described how the *architecture* of platforms like Tumblr can serve to direct these processes, giving TNB+ young people tools to construct and to represent their identities that are inaccessible in analog contexts. Tumblr's unique tagging and reblogging features, its separation from existing social networks and social media sites, and its centering of labels as an arbiter of community access all help to shape young TNB+ people's use

of language in this space, and can help contribute to the coinage of new identity labels (many of which point to the nuances of intersectional subject positions that may otherwise be overlooked by community organizers).

The sections above make it clear that the Internet has done a lot to EXPAND our gender universe. It's given people the space to coin labels that didn't exist within the context of our binary gender system, and the tools to make those labels visible to others (when they might be missed in real time). My participants clearly affirm that social media has created the conditions for the public to recognize them in ways we couldn't before -- just as light pollution must be curbed in order to appreciate the number of stars that fill the sky. While the Internet is not "making" people trans, it does seem to play a role in shaping whether people that *already* felt a desire to explore gender ultimately go on to claim an identity as TNB+. In this respect, I agree with Littman (2018) that these spaces are highly influential for TNB+ young people, and that interaction in these spaces has the potential to direct their identity claims. My participants, too, would agree that gender identity -- like gender expression -- is socially constructed, not set in stone, and that social context has played a role in shaping their identity trajectories. They would *disagree* with Littman, however, about the *limits* of gender's malleability, and about the causal parallels that Littman develops between social media participation and the *development* of TNB+ identity. To the extent that "diffusion" of TNB+ identities *can* be said to occur in these spaces, my participants would also disagree with Littman and Shrier's normative evaluation of such diffusion. If there *is* an element of peer influence undergirding some of these identity projects, my participants would reject assertions that this influence is socially detrimental.

While social media clearly helps to anchor the identity projects of many TNB+ young people, a secondary argument developed in this dissertation has been that the *same* capacities that

make these spaces so compelling for TNB+ young people also serve to introduce new *risks*. In the next section, I review my arguments on the dual nature of these features/affordances of these spaces, and on the implications they hold for TNB+ youth.

Potential and Precarity: Framing the Duality of Sociotechnical Affordances

These interviews have suggested that TNB+ youth spend a majority of their waking hours accessing the Internet, and that much of that time is spent in online communities oriented around TNB+ or LGBTQ+ people. While these spaces are powerful for TNB+ young people, the young adults profiled here attest that they can also be very damaging. They can be high-conflict spaces, where identity-based tensions run high; they promise (relative) liberation from the body, but this decentralization of the body creates an attachment to identity labels that can introduce new risks; they give new people new ways to label and express themselves, but they also give people additional incentive to police the *usage* of those identity labels. Ultimately, the same set of features and affordances that make these spaces so useful and alluring for TNB+ young people also make these spaces challenging to navigate in ways that can serve to put TNB+ young people at risk, or dissuade them from engaging altogether.

The Internet -- presented in the literature as a proto-disembodied space -- is often billed as a space where participants can circumvent some of the narrative-driven tensions introduced in Chapter 4. In digital environments, the body is less of a liability; participants have more control over how they're being read, and how much information people have about their bodies. The trade-off is that when the body is de-centered as the center of what defines gender, labels come to take center stage. This makes it important for participants to clearly define and state their labels -- ALL of their labels -- in these spaces, rendering users vulnerable to harassment (from both inside and

outside of the community). Findings from Chapter 5 suggest that while gender accountability *looks* different online (primarily manifested through narrative/language use rather than through/on the body), the imperative to account for gender remains intact. Digital environments loosen some of the constraints that TNB+ people might face in off-line spaces as a consequence of their embodiment, but they introduce new constraints on how (and in what modality) users choose to define themselves.

This shift from bodies to labels as a core arbiter of gender identity takes on even greater significance when we consider *how* the internet has enabled gender identity labels to proliferate. As described in Chapter 6, the affordances of the digital context itself also play a role in driving identity proliferation. Findings presented in this chapter suggest that one mechanism helping to drive identity proliferation may be the ongoing threat of conflict around users' identity claims – another threat precipitated and informed by the architecture of Tumblr itself. In this sense, Tumblr has worked both to *empower* TNB+ youth (by giving them the space and tools needed to coin new, more descriptive identity labels) *and* to disenfranchise them. These findings speak to the profound need for further research into the role – or *roles* – of these kinds of sociotechnical affordances in shaping online identity movements.

Finally, chapter 7 has helped to convey how these affordances shape practices of community *exclusion* – not just by incentivizing identity challenge (as described in Chapter 6), but by *amplifying* those challenges and encouraging them to escalate. The (relative) anonymity of the virtual context, the viral transmission of identity challenges that these spaces afford, and other features of the built environment work both to render identity challenges more common, and to make the *stakes* of these challenges higher. My findings attest that the structure and architecture

of these online environments shape the identity projects that take shape within them: both for better, and for worse.

Implications for the Sociology of Gender

The findings discussed here hold a variety of important implications for our understanding of gender (and of trans and non-binary identities, in particular). Chapter 3 has demonstrated that today's young people interpret gender in ways that go well beyond challenging the binary between masculinity and femininity, or the cis/trans binary. The prevalence and virulence of the intra-community identity challenges and conflicts over language use that my participants describe serve as testimony to how rapidly young people's understanding of gender and sexuality is evolving "on the ground," and how challenging it can be (even for established members of the community) to keep up with this evolution. While some participants -- like Sebastian (20, they/them) and Jayde (24, she/her) -- expressed that these kinds of conflicts over language use can feel "meaningless" or seem to serve little purpose in the "real [read: analog] world," I argue that the terminology TNB+ young people coin online (and the strategies they employ to defend that terminology) carry *great* meaning. Although some of the identity projects young people take on online are context-delimited, their possible *impacts* transcend the digital domain.

One thing that's interesting about these interviews is the challenge that (some of) these people introduce to our understanding of the relationship between gender identity and gender presentation. Historically, sociologists have tended to think about these things as closely related to one another. West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that the primary way our gender is (and can be) known -- at least in analog spaces -- is through our gender presentation. In most contexts, it's taken for granted that a person's gender identity will accord with their gender presentation, because to present in a manner *inconsistent* with one's identity risks misrecognition (at best) or violence (at

worst). Under the terms of the “dominant narrative” of trans identity, a trans person is a person whose gender presentation is inconsistent with their gender identity; to “transition” is to bring these two things into alignment, whether through shifts in aesthetics/styles or through medical intervention. Some of the participants in this sample, however, perceived this relationship differently. Several explained that they perceived no direct relationship between gender identity and gender presentation at all: that is, that there was (or *should be*) no inherent connection between seeing a person in a dress and designating them as a “woman,” or seeing a balding person with a beard and designating them a “man.” They expressed that any and all forms of presentation should be open to all, regardless of how they identify; and, similarly, all forms of *identity* should be accessible to all, regardless of how they present.

In some ways, this divestment of gender identity from gender presentation represents an inclusive and socially progressive transition. It speaks to the same kind of separation of gender performance from gender “essence” that sociologists have endorsed in calling for the “undoing” of gender (e.g., West & Zimmerman 2009; Risman 2009; Deutsch 2007; Connell 2010; Darwin 2017; Dozier 2018). However -- particularly within our contemporary cultural climate, where conservative backlash continues to escalate violence towards trans people and access to medical transition continues to be heavily pathologized -- this separation is also a thing that many trans people find deeply threatening. While some TNB+ people do not experience physiological dysphoria, many *do* experience *profound* body-based dysphoria; for these people, medical transition sometimes offers the only real hope of survival. To frame gender as an expressive attribute -- something that can be put on or taken off at will, or that participants *choose* as a part of their personal style -- draws the legitimacy of these projects into question. This tension is part of what lies at the root of the conflict between “truscum”/transmedicalists and “tucutes,” as

discussed in Chapter 6 -- the fear that the “seriousness” of transition (Stone 2013) will be undermined (and access to medical transition foreclosed) if gender presentation is recast as a form of “play.”

Conflicts surrounding who can claim identity as a Sapphic or lesbian can also trace their roots to our evolving understanding of the relationship between identity and presentation. Indeed, when the word “lesbian” was originally conceived, it was used primarily to refer to “inverts”: women that sexologists (e.g., Krafft-Ebing 1886; Ellis 1897) classified as displaying an “inversion” of normative gender traits (including -- but scarcely limited to -- attraction to women). In this sense, the descriptor served as centrally as a gender identity descriptor as it did a sexual one. This historical intertwining of gender variance and lesbian identity has helped to shape the tensions around identity claims that pervade Sapphic spaces today. While there are some tensions in Sapphic spaces that really do center around sexuality (e.g., the question of whether cis women that (sometimes) sleep with cis men should be allowed to self-describe as Sapphic or lesbian), there are many more that are anchored in gender. For instance, many scholars have attested to fear among lesbians that more widespread acceptance of TNB+ identities will incentivize the “disappearance” of butch women (Stein 2010), or that lesbians will be “duped” by the patriarchy into abandoning feminism and becoming men (Goldberg 2014). While these fears have been largely debunked -- after all, butch women remain alive and well; see e.g. Newton 2018 -- their presence continues to inform community dynamics in both TNB+ and Sapphic spaces. Conflicts over whether non-binary people should be allowed to describe themselves as lesbian or whether women attracted to both cis women and trans men should be allowed to self-describe as lesbian (Pfeffer 2014) are outgrowths of these historical tensions; the pervasiveness of these conflicts

speaks to the urgency with which trans, non-binary, and lesbian young people are laboring to *reconcile* these longer-standing intra-community conflicts today.

Another contribution these findings make to the gender literature -- and another element missing from Littman and Shrier's arguments on "social contagion" -- is the acknowledgement that hegemonic masculinity plays a role in shaping AMAB and AFAB young people's differential rates of identity disclosure. Shrier (2020) in particular has contended that AFAB young people may be disproportionately likely to claim trans identity, because they wish to escape from womanhood or resist classification as feminine -- an argument which, in itself, can be conceptually yoked to fears of women being "duped" by the patriarchy into rejecting their womanhood (as described above). Within the all-consuming context of heteronormativity, heteropatriarchy, and cissexism, femininity can feel suffocating. Within these systems, women are variously commodified (Rubin 1975), used as political bargaining chips (Rubin 1975) or championed as "prizes" for successful men, devalued and conscripted into "behind-the-scenes" service and support. Taught to disavow their own bodily autonomy and agency, women (cis and trans alike) learn that their bodies are largely ornamental surfaces (Bartky 1998), meant for the consumption and pleasure of (cisgender) men. Martin, for instance, has argued that while cis boys' perceptions of their own agency and their enthusiasm about their dawning sexual maturity help to temper anxieties about the uncertainty of adolescence, cis girls often come to associate their bodies with danger, shame, uncleanness, and lack of control (Martin 1996). Indeed, even from as early on as preschool, while boys are conditioned to interpret their bodies as active instruments (and while physical assertions of their agency are tolerated or rewarded), girls learn instead to carefully *manage* their bodies, *restrain* their impulses, and attend to their bodies as ornamental surfaces (Martin 1998). In the contemporary moment, rising anxieties about the role of social media in

shaping young women's perceptions of their bodies (e.g., on Instagram -- see Butkowski et al 2019, Cohen et al 2017) continue to affirm the (unruly, problematic) body as the philosophical locus of "womanhood." In theory, online communities for TNB+ youth offer AFAB young people enticing alternatives to normative cis femininity that some may find hard to ignore.

These arguments, however, overlook the role that hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987) plays in shaping the identity projects of many *AMAB* youth. As participant Topher (22, he/him) suggested, the rigid constraints of hegemonic masculinity can make it challenging for *AMAB* people (and for transgender men) to embrace more feminine modes of expression, even when these would otherwise feel personally authentic for them. Sociologists have well established that male femininity is characterized differently than female masculinity, and yields a different (generally, more negative) public response (Halberstam 1998; Meadow 2018; Pascoe 2011; Kane 2006). Men -- including queer (Pascoe 2011) and trans men (Schilt 2010) -- are constantly tasked with projecting and defending an image of normative masculinity. It is this differential perception of masculinity -- the effort that must be expended to defend it, and the ease with which it is undermined -- that has led some to classify masculinity as "fragile" (Rubin et al 2020). In this regard, it is unsurprising that *AMAB* people would self-disclose at lower rates than *AFAB* people, particularly when it comes to non-binary identities.

As the participants profiled here attest, even in online spaces -- in theory, an equal-opportunity forum for participation, where some of these anxieties about normative presentation are attenuated -- *AMAB* users may struggle to participate. Given the hypersexualization of trans women (Anzani et al 2021; Fischer 2019; Serano 2009) and ongoing stereotypic associations between trans femininity and participation in sex work (Wodda & Panfil 2021; Demeri 2019), *AMAB* trans people are more likely to be led astray by search engines in their efforts to search for

information about trans identities; when they *do* gain entry into TNB+ spaces, they are more likely to be stereotyped as aggressive, domineering, or potentially violent than are many AFAB users (particularly AFAB users that have not taken testosterone). Shrier and Littman’s arguments about AFAB people “fleeing womanhood” neglect the reality that it is easier (and comparatively lower-risk) for AFAB people to come out and to change their style of presentation than it is for AMAB people. Interestingly, stereotypes of “women”/AFAB people as being “more fluid” (Diamond 2008) with respect to presentation or more prone to “phases” and experimentation than their AMAB counterparts can work in the service of AFAB non-binary people here; their exploration of gender is perhaps more likely to be seen as transient or discreditable (for the same reasons outlined above), but also less likely to be seen as threatening or perceived as a cause for concern than is the gender exploration of AMAB people.

This work speaks to a fundamental re-ordering of our understanding not only of what trans identities are and “mean,” but also about what gender *itself* is and means. In *Where the Millennials Will Take Us* (2018), Barbara Risman argues that the “conflict between expectation and reality” at different levels of the gender structure creates what she calls “crisis tendencies” -- moments of tension that can provide the leverage activists need to more effectively agitate for change. Recognizing the radically transformative potential of these conflicts around self-definition and language use, Risman argues that her framework can be used to draw the diverse (and, at times, contradictory) foci and aims of TNB+ youth together into a single tapestry: a tapestry with the capacity to remediate our gender structure from the ground up. With this vision in mind, she calls for a fourth wave of feminism that will commence the utopian project of “ending gender.”

Given the propensity of TNB+ online communities to foster the kinds of “crisis tendencies” that Risman describes, is it possible that my data help to signal the onset of such a “gender

revolution?” Unfortunately, at present, I feel these findings suggest otherwise. While the Internet has helped to contribute to the expansion of gender categories and to a proliferation of new identity labels, it has also served to intensify conflict among the different identity groups that cluster beneath the TNB+ “umbrella.” Making identity labels a more visible and salient component of online interaction has spurred an increase in conflict about who can use which labels, and how these labels should ideally be defined. As described in Chapter 6, desire to avoid conflict around label usage can sometimes serve to *reinforce* label proliferation, encouraging users to adopt more and more highly-specified language to circumvent possible identity challenges. When these challenges escalate, users can be deterred (or physically ousted) from full participation in TNB+ spaces online.

While I concur that social media has granted TNB+ people new freedoms and helped to make their identities visible in previously impossible ways, I don’t think that this expansion is likely to “end gender” -- even if “ending gender” were a goal to which TNB+ young people universally aspired (which it is not). To effect a “fourth wave” of feminism, people marginalized by the existing gender structure will need to unite and mobilize together in the service of this vision. Although social media could (in theory) help to facilitate such large-scale mobilization, the features and affordances of today’s social media platforms have encouraged us to operate instead under a kind of “false consciousness,” where desire to assert our own uniqueness (and to avoid persecution by others) can end up undermining the potential for collective action. Agitation between and among TNB+ people has led to the creation of new identity labels and new social spaces for trans people -- arguably, positive gains -- but, rather than helping members of these spaces to unite and subvert the gender order, this agitation (spurred by the affordances of digital environments) has led instead to fracturing and the formation of splinter communities, driving

otherwise like-minded cohorts of TNB+ people into smaller and smaller “filter bubbles” (when, that is, they can muster up the courage to participate in online spaces at all).

For these reasons, I don’t anticipate that Risman’s grand utopian vision will come to pass - at least in the near future (just as I continue to await, with equal measures of hope and skepticism, the arrival of Marx’s long-awaited economic revolution). However, my work does *build* upon Risman’s by offering insight into a dimension of social structure that she leaves unexplored -- the infrastructure of our virtual communities. **Findings from this dissertation inform...**

Contributions to Feminist Scholarship

There are three central ways in which my training in feminist theory and methods has enriched this work. For one, as I’ve learned time and again from my colleagues and mentors in this program, “feminist research” is far more than “research on women” (or even “research on gender”). Feminist *theory* is worth little in the absence of feminist *praxis*, and feminist praxis is about the improvement of *practical* and *structural* conditions for those disadvantaged by compulsory heterosexuality, cissexism, and heteropatriarchy (regardless of gender). This research is “feminist” in that it does not seek use participants’ experiences as grist for the sociological mill, but instead seeks to improve the day-to-day practical experience of those that contributed their insights to the work. Findings from this work can be used to inform social media platform design and to shape best practices for online community management, improving life conditions for LGBTQ young people and helping to improve the support systems put in place to aid them.

This project makes three primary contributions to feminist sociology. First, just as considerations regarding the rights of women (and others marginalized with respect to gender and sexuality) span across all domains of social life, the project of advancing feminist theory is inherently *interdisciplinary*. In sociology, the insights gleaned from feminist theory (and, truly,

from scholars working in Women's and Gender Studies more generally) have long been sequestered into specialty journals and held apart from the "mainstream" of sociological research and thought. As Stacey and Thorne have famously suggested, "by focusing on sociology as if it were a bounded endeavor, we have given the false impression that feminist sociologists, historians, or anthropologists mine in separate disciplinary tunnels...feminist work in different disciplines must be sensitive to effects of disciplinary training, but it also should more fully probe our shared terrain" (1985, p. 311). My work takes a step in the service of this call to action, drawing together bodies of literature in sociology, information science, cultural studies, psychology, and queer theory in the service of a broader (and quintessentially "feminist") exploration of social media's role in shaping (trans)gender experience.

This project also contributes to the sociological literature on TNB+ people by enhancing our understanding of how trans identities are socially constructed. While sociologists have long recognized gender as a social product and acknowledged the role of social context in shaping gender presentation and performance, work on the social construction of trans identities has lagged behind, due in part to long-standing cultural framings of trans identities as "innate" or biologically undergirded. These persistent, biologically reductionist narratives persist in part because they are conceptually yoked to *medicalization* – our cultural endorsement of transgender identities as "disordered" and as problems to be resolved through medical intervention – and in part because some present such narratives as empowering, framing possible biological underpinnings of LGBTQ+ identities as evidence of these identities' "authenticity" and immutability to change (for example, fans of Lady Gaga's seminal "pride anthem" *Born This Way*). My work moves beyond accounts of trans identity as "innate" to examine how trans and non-binary identity narratives are constructed, *de*-constructed, and *re*-constructed online, shifting or eroding in response to particular

interactions or to structural constraints. Rather than treating gender as a variable (Stacey & Thorne 1985), it conveys participants' perspectives in their full kaleidoscopic complexity, holding space for contradiction and for change over time – an intervention that some sociologists might perceive as analytically challenging, but which feminists recognize as fundamental.

Finally, this research leverages feminist methodological insights by interrogating my *own* experiences, identities, and beliefs alongside (or in concert with) those of my respondents. While sociologists have been slow to embrace autoethnography as an empirical tool, autoethnographic methods are undeniably “feminist”: they work to remediate the imbalance of power between researcher and researched by situating “the observer and the observed [in] the same causal scientific plane” (Harding 1991, p. 11). Following this affirmation, later chapters in my dissertation take my own experiences in the field as the object of analysis, exploring how my own presentation and identities colored my interactions with respondents (both participating, and prospective). These chapters center my own experiences as data, affirming the analytic utility of autoethnography and other feminist methodologies that mainstream sociologists have denigrated as “navel-gazing,” “me-search,” or “not sociology” (Schilt 2018).

Contributions to UX Research/Platform Design

This research also makes important contributions to our understanding of social media platform design. TNB+ young people are a rapidly growing population, and they comprise a significant share of today's SMS user base (especially given that they tend to be disproportionately *heavy* users, in terms of the time they spend online). While UX researchers and designers have historically framed TNB+ people as “edge cases” -- users whose experiences are “extreme,” will seldom create issues for designers, and aren't generally treated as fundamental in anchoring platform design (Chechique, n.d.) -- rising prevalence and prominence of TNB+ people suggest

that this framing is no longer sustainable (either from an equity standpoint, *or* from a technological standpoint. As Mike Monteiro has beautifully summarized:

When you decide who you're designing for, you're making an implicit statement about who you're *not* designing for. For years, we referred to people who weren't crucial to our products' success as 'edge cases.' We were marginalizing people. And we were making a decision that there were people in the world whose problems weren't worth solving. Facebook now claims to have two billion users. 1% of two billion people, which most products would consider an 'edge case,' is twenty million people. Those are the people at the margins. These are the trans people who get caught on the edges of 'real names' projects. These are the single moms who get caught on the edges of 'both parents must sign' permission slips. These are the elderly immigrants who show up to vote and can't get ballots in their native tongues. They are not edge cases. They are human beings, and we owe them our best work. (Monteiro 2019)

As UX architects pivot to embrace TNB+ people, this dissertation stands to make important contributions to their efforts. Decades of successful agitating on the part of TNB+ programmers and computer scientists -- in particular, trans women (Dame-Griff, forthcoming; Adair 2017) -- have played an instrumental role in building trans people safer spaces to organize online. Cis designers have also increased their efforts to center TNB+ people within the architecture of these spaces. However, my findings suggest that the features and affordances that render online spaces compelling for TNB+ young people are often *identical* to the features and affordances that precipitate harassment and exclusion for TNB+ users. The fundamental "duality" of these impacts suggests that even as we strive to design with trans users in mind, these efforts can yield unintended consequences. Social media companies would benefit from integrating TNB+ young people into the design process -- both by attending to their experiences through UX research, and by *employing* TNB+ designers and community leaders to aid in data collection and analysis -- to help anticipate these issues and reduce their potential for harm.

Extant literature on the consequences of heavy (or “problematic”) internet use has also suggested that intensive social media use may carry different impacts for trans people (and for other members of socially stigmatized communities) than it does for cis-het people. Allen and colleagues (2021), for example, have recently discovered that while studies of cisgender young adults have consistently linked increased social media use to loneliness (Yavich et al 2019; Mazuz & Yom-Tov 2020), poorer body image (Fardouly & Vartanian 2016; Santarossa & Woodruff 2017), and poorer mental health (Twenge & Campbell 2019; Berryman et al 2018), surveys of TNB+ young adults suggest the opposite pattern, linking increased social media use among TNB+ youth to *improved* mental health, and body image. Understanding the online communities where TNB+ young people spend much of their time is critical to understanding these patterns. While this dissertation can’t fully account for the interactional and institutional mechanisms driving the findings described by Allen et al (2021), research like mine does represent a *first step* into exploring these mechanisms -- an exploration, in this case, which survey research has been unable to fully afford.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

I close with a few brief suggestions for future research. For one, as highlighted in chapter 3, these data attest to a clear need for improved data on the *intersectional* operation of these process, particularly with respect to race and educational background. For example, while my (predominantly white) participants often reported feeling victimized or castigated by their experiences of intra-community “call-outs” (particularly around race), findings presented in Chapter 7 have established the importance of these practices for the safety and well-being of users of color (Nakamura 2015; Clark 2020). As such, it is likely that queer and trans youth of color --

and queer and trans *women* of color, specifically -- experience these kinds of call-outs differently. Users from different racial or ethnic groups may also experience *identity challenges* differently, finding that their racial identities (or others' perceptions thereof) curtail their access to TNB+ community spaces or make these spaces feel less safe. Future research should purposively recruit participants of color, participants with limited college experience, and participants from working-class backgrounds -- ideally, soliciting feedback from such participants throughout *all* dimensions of the research process, from design through analysis -- to further enhance our understanding of these processes.

This project has focused on the experiences of TNB+ young adults. I chose to focus on this age group for three reasons: (A) because I was interested in the experiences of queer young people on Tumblr, and the majority of Tumblr users fall into this age cohort (Smith 2013); (B) because I have been interested in exploring how social media use influences the language and the labels that TNB+ people use to describe their identities, and identity-related concerns are most salient for many people as they navigate adolescence and young adulthood (Erikson 1968); and (C) because users that occupy this age group (at the time of this writing) are among the first to have grown up fully immersed in social media, and whose social media participation helps to shape not only their friendship networks and social support experiences, but also their *institutional* engagement (e.g., with school and work). However, the dynamics explored in this dissertation have impacts that extend to other age cohorts, too. Future research is needed to explain how *older* cohorts of TNB+ people (for instance, those in their 30s and 40s) experience these online communities, and how their participation in these spaces has shaped *their* identity trajectories. Although those in this age group have often been characterized by social psychologists as likely to feel more “settled” in their identities (e.g., Erikson 1968) than those in their teens and twenties, there's evidence that this

pattern is changing for older cohorts of TNB+ people, and social media and the Internet have done much to contribute to this change. Until quite recently, coming out as trans -- to say nothing of coming out as non-binary -- seemed an unattainable dream for many older adults, most of whom were reared in homes and in cities where trans people were scapegoated and abused (if their existence was recognized at all). Today, seeing older adults come out as trans is increasingly common (as the much-spotlighted transitions of pop-cultural figures like Caitlyn Jenner and Lilly Wachowski attest). Research is needed to understand how social media and online communities have shaped this older cohort's engagement with the trans and non-binary community, and how these spaces have influenced their coming out and self-actualization trajectories.

In the same vein, research is needed to more fully elaborate the significance of these spaces for *younger* TNB+ people, who are also coming out and accessing social/medical transition with a greater frequency than in generations past. While much of the extant research on social media use has centered the experiences of emerging adults (the population characterized as spending the *most* time using social media; see Auxier & Anderson 2021), younger people *also* describe consistently high access to social media, despite platform age guidelines that (theoretically) foreclose access to children. Over 95% of teens ages 13-17 have access to a smartphone; 72% use Instagram, 69% use Snapchat, and 51% have an active Facebook account (Anderson & Jiang 2018). Social media platforms are also becoming familiar territory for even younger users, with researchers at the University of Michigan recently concluding that 49% of children ages 10-12 and nearly a third (32%) of children ages 7-9 are active on social media (many of them accessing these services for educational purposes, or through parents' social media accounts -- see Clark et al 2021). Children in this age group may have a very different experience of online spaces oriented around TNB+ people than do the users profiled in this dissertation -- and, more importantly, these

spaces can also carry greater *risks* for younger users, who may struggle to judge which online contexts are safe for disclosure or which pieces of information (e.g., school; participation in sports; seeing a particular doctor or therapist; etc.) might render them identifiable. Research is needed to help understand the experiences of these users, and to develop technologies that can help to mitigate these risks.

While this project has leveraged qualitative data exclusively, these data could be meaningfully complemented with quantitative or network-based research into the social media use of TNB+ young people. While my interviews and content analysis shed important light on how users *experience* online communities for TNB+ people, gaining a sense of the *accuracy* of their perceptions is challenging with qualitative data alone. For example, while my participants report that it is commonplace for users that have been “called out” or had their identities challenged to abandon online communities for TNB+ people altogether, their reflections alone can’t be taken as evidence of the frequency with which these departures actually take place. Similarly, while my participants suggest that “cancellation” can have profound repercussions for community members because they circulate across platforms, the statistical frequency of this cross-pollination between platforms has yet to be captured (and, as explained in Chapter 7, participants may tend to overstate the virality and the reach of these kinds of cancellations, due to their immersion in tightly-networked TNB+-focused communities where the same kinds of content are shared over and over again). The integration of psychological and social-psychological data could also help to quantify the impacts of participation in these spaces on young people’s mental health. These (and other) questions could be usefully augmented with statistical or network data in future explorations.

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APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE AND PRE-SCREENING SURVEY

Q1) Documentation of Informed Consent

Gender, Rendered: Trans Bodies, Trans Selves, and Social Media Use

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Spencer Garrison, a doctoral candidate in Sociology and LGBTQ Studies at the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor. This document describes the research project in which you are being asked to take part. It also details your specific rights as a participant in the research process, and reviews the researcher's responsibilities to you.

Section I: What is the purpose of this study?

This study is meant to help us learn more about how young adults (between the ages of 18 and 25) who identify as trans or gender non-conforming use social media in their day-to-day lives. In particular, we are interested in learning more about how trans and gender nonconforming young people construct self-representations (avatars, profiles, or other representations meant to convey information about the self) online, and understanding how social media may aid users in refining and re-imagining these presentations of self over time. Understanding how trans users convey information about their gender(s) to others and navigate identity challenges online can provide us with valuable insight into how gender identities are rendered legible to online others, as well as insight into the role(s) that various social media platforms may play in facilitating (or impeding) this process.

Section II: What will my participation involve?

Participation involves two stages:

1) *Demographic Survey*: You will be asked to complete a brief survey (distributed online). This survey contains a series of questions about your social identities and demographic characteristics (your race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and so on). It also contains an instrument designed to help the research team better understand your social networks (both online and offline). This questionnaire will take approximately 25-30 minutes to complete.

2) *Interviews*: You will also be asked to participate in two interview sessions, each of which will last between 90 and 120 minutes (1.5-2 hours). Interviews will be conducted via teleconference using a browser-based video-conferencing program called Blue Jeans. If you are unable to participate in a video interview, a telephone interview may be substituted at your request. Your first interview will take place shortly after your consent form has been returned and your

questionnaire has been completed. During this interview, the researcher will ask you questions about your social identities (including your gender identity), your coming out process and transition experiences (if any), your social support networks, and your social media use. The second interview will be scheduled for approximately 90 days after the first interview session. In this session, you will sit with the researcher in front of your laptop or mobile device and discuss your use of social media over the previous 90 days. You will be asked questions about the changes you may have made to your social media profiles or about particular pieces of content that you may have posted or removed from your social media pages over the course of this 90-day interval. You will also be asked to show the researcher your social media pages, and to walk the researcher through how you use various platforms in your day-to-day life.

Section III: What will I get for participating? Will I be paid?

As a token of our appreciation, you will receive a \$50 MasterCard gift card for each interview session that you complete (resulting in a possible total of \$100 in gift cards for participating in both interviews). These gift cards are valid at any location where MasterCard is accepted, including most major online retailers.

Section IV: Will my responses be recorded?

With your permission, the research team would like to audio-record these interview sessions for transcription and later analysis. Audio-recordings will be encrypted and stored on a secure cloud-based server at the University of Michigan, accessible only to members of the research team. Recordings will be labeled and archived using your participant identification number (not your name or screen name). Recording of these interviews is optional. If you consent to have your interview recorded, you will not be photographed or videotaped – only the audio from the interview session will be captured. You will be asked to confirm whether you agree to the recording of the interview before each session begins.

Section V: Will my answers be kept confidential?

Your name and contact information will be maintained in a secure, encrypted file stored separately from your interview materials. Only the Principal Investigator will have access to your name, screen name(s), e-mail address, and participant ID number. Transcripts, audio recordings, and other interview materials will be labeled with your participant ID number alone. At the conclusion of the project, the document linking respondents' identities to their participant ID numbers will be deleted, and your contact information destroyed.

Section VI: What if I'm not comfortable answering something? May I skip questions?

As a part of this research, you will be asked questions about your identity and experiences that you may find personal in nature. Your participation in this research is completely voluntary: you may decline to answer any question, for any reason and at any time. Declining to answer a question will not jeopardize your participation in the study in any way. You may also choose to end the interview at any time by telling the interviewer "I want to stop." If you choose to end the interview early, you will still receive the \$100 gift card for your participation.

Section VII: What if I want to withdraw from the study?

You may withdraw from the study at any time by notifying a member of the research team. If you choose to withdraw, you will not be compensated for research activities that have not yet been completed. For example, if you withdraw from the study without participating in the second interview session, you will not receive the second \$50 gift card that you would otherwise have earned. If you wish to withdraw from the study and do not want any of your responses or data to be analyzed as a part of the project, you must notify the Principal Investigator (Spencer) in writing that you wish to have your data destroyed. If you do not notify the study team to destroy your data, any data provided (interviews, survey data, etc.) up to the point of your withdrawal from the project may still be used as a part of this research, and may be archived or retained along with other study records (without your name or identifying information attached).

Section VIII: Will you keep my data long-term?

With your permission, the PI would like to archive the data – your study questionnaire, audio recordings, and typed interview transcripts – for reference and future analysis. As we do not know at this time how long it will take to fully collect and analyze the data, we request your consent to archive the data from this study indefinitely. This information will be labeled and archived with only your participant identification number in order to protect your privacy. If you do not wish to have your data archived, you may opt out of this process by notifying the PI in writing at any time (whether before or after your interview).

Section IX: What risks do I face by participating in this study?

The major risk involved with participation in this study is the potential for breach of confidentiality. Any research producing first-person records carries the potential for violation of your privacy, should the records be stolen or unlawfully accessed: for example, if an unauthorized entity were to obtain our recorded audio files and use voiceprint technology to identify the speakers. However, as all audio files and other data products will be encrypted and maintained on a secure, cloud-based server, we believe the risk of such an occurrence to be minimal. In addition, it is possible that discussion of your personal experiences may be uncomfortable or upsetting to some degree. However, we do not believe that the risk of discomfort from participating in these interview sessions will exceed the discomfort that might be anticipated from discussion of these experiences in other contexts (for example, during conversations with a friend or family member).

If you have questions or concerns about the study, your compensation, or other aspects of the research process, please contact Spencer Garrison (genderrendered@gmail.com). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or if you wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns you may have about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the University of Michigan Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board. The Institutional Review Board can be reached by phone at (734) 936-0933, toll-free at (866) 936-0933, via e-mail at irbhsbs@umich.edu, or at the address below: University of Michigan IRB-HSBS 2800 Plymouth Road Bldg. 520, Room #1169 Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2800.

Q2

I understand the information provided above, and my questions about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q3 I understand that this project involves two separate interview sessions of 90-120 minutes each. I agree to participate in both interview sessions.

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q4 I agree to have my interview sessions audio-recorded and transcribed.

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q5 By entering my full name below, I indicate my consent to participate in this research.

Page Break

Q7 Please enter your Participant Identification Number (PIN) in the box below. (If you do not know or cannot remember your PIN number, e-mail Spencer for help!)

Q8 Please enter today's date:

Page Break

Thank you for agreeing to participate today!

The following series of questions is intended to tell us more about your basic demographic characteristics -- your age, gender, racial or ethnic identities, and so on. If you would prefer not to answer a particular question, feel free to skip it -- this will not jeopardize your participation on the project.

Q9 What is your current age?

Q10 Where do you currently reside?

o City: (1) _____

o State: (2) _____

Q12 How would you describe your racial or ethnic identity?

Q13 How would you describe your gender identity?

Q65 What pronoun(s) do you use?

Q14 How would you describe your sexual orientation/sexual identity?

Q24 How would you describe your sense of *sexual attraction* -- the types of people that you feel the most physically attracted to?

Q25 How would you describe your sense of *romantic attraction* -- the types of people that you feel the most emotionally attracted to, or imagine starting romantic relationships with?

Page Break

Q15 How would you describe your religious affiliation or spiritual beliefs (if any)?

Q16 On a scale of 1-10 (with 10 meaning **extremely important** and 1 meaning **not at all important**), how important do you feel that your religious or spiritual beliefs are to your life right now? (Drag the sliding bar to indicate your answer.)

Not at all Slightly Moderately Very Extremely
important important important important important

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How important a role does religion play in your life right now? ()

Q17 Do you regularly attend services at a church, mosque, synagogue, or other formal place of worship?

- No, I never attend religious services. (1)
- I attend services once or twice a year (for example, on holidays). (2)
- I attend services several times a year, but no more than once a month. (3)
- I attend services once or twice a month. (4)
- I attend services once a week. (5)
- I attend services multiple times each week. (6)
- Other (please describe): (7) _____

Page Break

Q18 What is the highest level of education that you have completed? (Please choose only one answer. Do NOT identify degrees that are currently in progress.)

- Less than the 8th grade (1)
- Some high school (grades 9-12), but no diploma (2)
- High school diploma or equivalent (3)
- Some college, but no degree (4)
- Associate's degree or technical certification (5)
- Bachelor's degree (6)
- Master's degree (7)
- Doctoral or professional degree (e.g., Ph.D.; M.D.; J.D.; M.B.A.) (8)
- Other (please specify): (9) _____

Q19 Are you currently enrolled in school?

- No, I am not currently attending school (1)
- Yes, at a trade school or in a certification program (2)
- Yes, at a community college (3)
- Yes, at a four-year college or university (4)

Yes, in a graduate or professional program (5)

Other (please specify): (6) _____

Skip To: Q21 If Are you currently enrolled in school? = No, I am not currently attending school

Q20 Are you enrolled in school part-time, or full-time?

Part-time (1)

Full-time (2)

Page Break

Q20 Are you enrolled in school part-time, or full-time?

Part-time (1)

Full-time (2)

Page Break

Q21 Do you currently work for pay?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Skip To: Q23 If Do you currently work for pay? = No

Skip To: Q22 If Do you currently work for pay? = Yes

Q22 Please describe your current occupation or form of employment. (If you hold more than one job, please feel free to list *all* of your positions here.)

Q23 Is there anything else that you think it's important for us to know about your employment situation, your unpaid or volunteer work, or your other responsibilities?

Page Break

Q26 Do you have an active Facebook account?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Skip To: Q27 If Do you have an active Facebook account? = No

Q32 How many days each week do you **check** Facebook?

Q33 How many days each week do you **post or share content** on Facebook?

Q34 How many days each week do you **interact with other users** on Facebook (for example, by posting comments)?

Q35 How much time do you estimate that you spend on Facebook each day?

Q27 Do you have an active Instagram account?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Skip To: Q28 If Do you have an active Instagram account? = No

Q36 How many days each week do you **check** Instagram?

Q37 How many days each week do you **post or share content** on Instagram?

Q38 How many days each week do you **interact with other users** on Instagram (for example, by posting comments)?

Q39 How much time do you estimate that you spend on Instagram each day?

Q28 Do you have an active YouTube account?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Skip To: Q29 If Do you have an active YouTube account? = No

Q40 How many days each week do you **check** YouTube?

Q41 How many days each week do you **post content** to YouTube?

Q42 How many days each week do you **interact with other users** on YouTube (for example, by posting comments)?

Q43 How much time do you estimate that you spend on YouTube each day?

Q29 Do you have an active Tumblr account?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Skip To: Q30 If Do you have an active Tumblr account? = No

Q44 How many days each week do you **check** Tumblr?

Q45 How many days each week do you **post or share content** on Tumblr?

Q46 How many days each week do you **interact with other users** on Tumblr (for example, by posting comments)?

Q47 How much time do you estimate that you spend on Tumblr each day?

Q30 Do you have an active Twitter account?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Skip To: Q31 If Do you have an active Twitter account? = No

Q48 How many days each week do you **check** Twitter?

Q49 How many days each week do you **post or share content** on Twitter?

Q50 How many days each week do you **interact with other users** on Twitter?

Q51 How much time do you estimate that you spend on Twitter each day?

Q31 Do you have an active Reddit account?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Skip To: Q56 If Do you have an active Reddit account? = No

Q52 How many days each week do you **check** Reddit?

Q53 How many days each week do you **post or share content** on Reddit?

Q54 How many days each week do you **interact with other users** on Reddit (for example, by posting comments)?

Q55 How much time do you estimate that you spend on Reddit each day?

Q56 Are there other social networking sites or online communities that you participate in as a regular member (for example, gaming communities like Discord; hobby-focused communities like DeviantArt or Ravelry; community-specific message boards like Susan's Place; etc.)?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Skip To: Q59 If Are there other social networking sites or online communities that you participate in as a regula... = No

Skip To: Q57 If Are there other social networking sites or online communities that you participate in as a regula... = Yes

Q57 Please list or describe the other online communities you regularly participate in below:

Q59 About how much time do you estimate that you spend online each day?

Q58 Do you believe that you spend the same amount of time online as your friends or peers do?

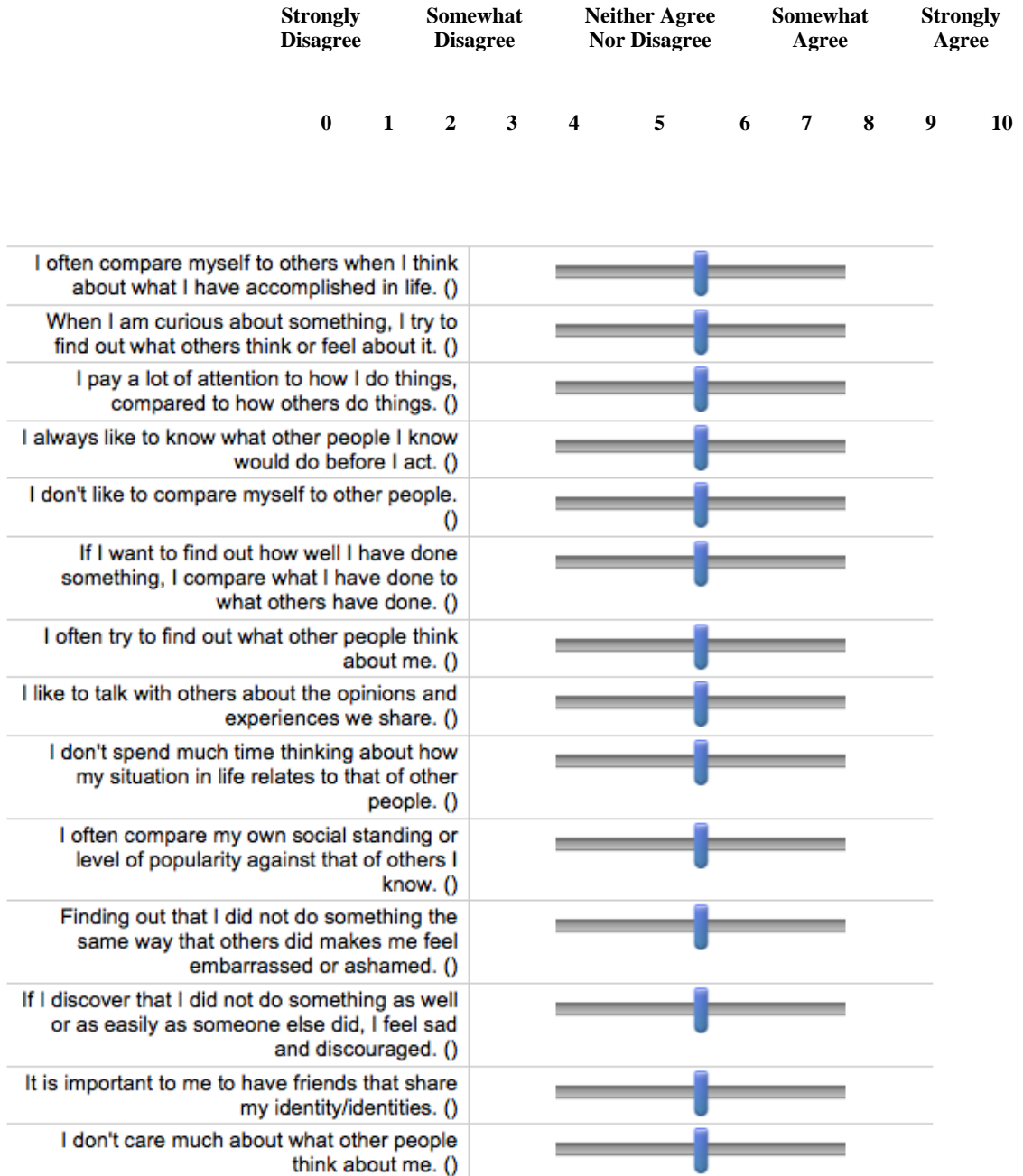
- I spend much more time online than my friends do (several more hours a day) (1)
- I spend a little more time online than my friends do (an hour or so more each day) (2)
- I spend about the same amount of time online that my friends do (3)
- I spend a little less time online than my friends do (an hour or so less each day) (4)
- I spend much less time online than my friends do (several fewer hours a day) (5)

Page Break

Q60 I'd like to learn more about some of the most important people in your life -- your friends, family members, and others that are close to you. Please use the table below to list the relationships that are most important to you.










Person's Initials (1)	What is this person's relationship to you? (2)	How long have you known this person? (3)	Are you "out" to this person as trans or gender non- conforming? (4)	Are you connected to this person online? (5)	Do you share at least one mutual friend with this person online? (6)	Are you connected to this person in off-line spaces? (7)	Do you share at least one mutual friend with this person off- line? (8)	On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 = "very weak" and 10 = "very strong"), how would you rate the closeness of your relationship to this person? (9)
Person #1...								
...Person #20								

Q62 Most people compare themselves with others from time to time. For example, they may compare the way they feel, their opinions, or their abilities with other people. There is nothing particularly 'good' or 'bad' about this type of comparison, and some people do it more than others. We would like to find out how often you compare yourself with other people. To do that, we ask you to indicate how much you agree with each of the statements below.



Q63 The following questions discuss your feelings about your identity as trans or gender non-conforming. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements using the sliding bars below.



I feel that I have to change the way that I express my gender to be able to fit in with others in my off-line life. ()	
I feel that I have to change the way that I express my gender to be able to fit in with others online. ()	
When I am interacting with others in my off-line life, I try not to show the parts of myself that might out me as trans or gender non-conforming. ()	
When I am interacting with others online, I try not to show the parts of myself that might out me as trans or gender non-conforming. ()	
I feel that my identity as trans or gender non-conforming is incompatible with some other parts of my life. ()	
I cannot talk to my family members about being trans or gender non-conforming. ()	
I cannot talk to my friends at school or work about my identity as trans or gender non-conforming. ()	
I often feel inauthentic -- that my identity as a trans or gender non-conforming person is not legitimate or "real." ()	
I worry that others will try to challenge or refute my identity as trans or gender non-conforming. ()	

Page Break

Q61 Is there anything else that you would like me to know about you before we meet for your interview session? Feel free to expand on any of your responses above, or to write about something new.

Q64 Which days of the week might work best to schedule your interview session(s)? Please tell us a little bit about your availability below:

End of Block: Default Question Block

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (INTERVIEW SESSION A)

1. Tell me a little about yourself. How might you identify or describe yourself to someone that was meeting you for the first time?
2. What are some of the elements of your identity that you would say are most central, salient, or important to you? Why do you think that these parts of your identity are so important?
3. Tell me a little bit about your gender identity. On the survey, you wrote that you identify as [identity label] -- can you tell me a little bit about what that means to you?
 1. How/when did you first come to identify as [label]? What was that experience like for you?
 2. Did you go through a process of questioning your identity, or experimenting with different labels? Tell me about that process.
 3. Are you out as [label] to others in your life? What was your coming-out process like, if any?
 4. Have you socially transitioned (or do you plan to in the future)? Can you tell me about what that process was like for you, if you've already socially transitioned? If you *haven't* done so, can you tell me what you *expect* that process to be like, and what you expect your own trajectory to look like with respect to social transition?
 5. Have you sought (or are you intending to seek) access to medical transition? What are your plans for transition at this point in time? What was the process of making these decisions like for you? If you have pursued medical transition, what have your experiences been like?
 6. Has anyone ever tried to challenge your identity as [label]? Why do you think this happened? What was that experience like? How did you respond?
1. I hear some participants talk about the 'dominant' narrative of trans identity -- the account of trans experience that most of the general public recognizes and affirms. Do you think that such a 'dominant' narrative exists? If so, how would you describe it?
2. Some interviewees report that transition, for them, involved learning 'how to be men' or 'how to be women' for the first time -- picking up mannerisms or behaviors that they'd never had an

opportunity to practice as kids. Has that been your experience? Why or why not? How do you present or signal your gender identity to others, and how have you refined your presentation over time?

3. Do you consider yourself to be an activist? Tell me about how your political life intersects with your trans identity, if it does so at all.
4. Do you feel like you've ever had to 'prove' your trans identity, or had to demonstrate to others that you were 'trans enough' to claim a particular identity label? What has 'proving' your gender looked like for you? What are some of the ways that you see others in your community trying to buttress themselves against these kinds of identity challenges?
5. Tell me a little about how you use social media. How often do you think that you access the Internet during a typical day?
 - a. What types of devices do you use to access the Internet (a home desktop, a laptop, a smartphone, a tablet, etc.)?
 - b. How important would you say that having Internet access and interacting with others online is to your day-to-day life? Why?
 - c. What types of things do you use social media for? Could you walk me through what a typical day of social media use looks like for you?
 - d. What are some of the major platforms that you use?
 - e. What other types of accounts or profiles do you maintain online -- things that might NOT qualify as "social media?"
 - f. Do you date or look for romantic/sexual partners online? Do you manage your identity differently in these kinds of spaces than you do on other social media platforms?
6. Have you used the Internet to form relationships with other trans people, or to access information about gender identity and transition? Tell me about what this has been like for you.
 - a. Did the information that you gained from others online -- trans-identified, or otherwise -- shape your decision-making about your own gender identity and transition process? In what way(s)?
 - b. Do you think that interacting and identifying as a trans person online differs from the experience of interacting with others as a trans person in offline contexts? If so, how so? If not, why not?
 - c. Do you think that you represent yourself differently online than you do in offline contexts? If so, in what way(s)?

- d. Do you present yourself differently in some online spaces or communities than you do in others? Why?
 - e. Do you think that your online profiles do a good job of capturing who you ‘really’ are? Why or why not?
 - f. How do you describe your gender identity to others online? Does this differ from one online context to another? Do you present yourself as one gender at some times/in some places, and another gender at/in others? Are there spaces where you prefer not to disclose that you are trans?
 - g. Do you think that the way that you think about gender -- either generally, or your gender identity specifically -- has changed since you joined [online community]? How so?
 - h. Have you ever tried to “pass” online as a gender that you are not? Tell me a little bit about that experience.
 - i. Do you think that you’re able to reliably figure out the gender of others that you encounter online? When you’re trying to figure out what someone else’s gender is online, how do you do it? What do you look for/look at first? Or is this not important to you when interacting with others online?
7. For how long (e.g., how many years) do you estimate that you have been using social media?
8. Do you ever think about your ‘digital footprint’ -- the discarded blogs, social networking accounts, and other personal content that we leave online as residue? What steps do you take when you want to distance yourself from an online account that you don’t plan to use any more?
- a. Do you ever worry that your old accounts or profiles might be accessible to others? What have you done to try to manage this, if anything?
9. How do you think that the experience of being trans online differs from your experience of navigating the offline world as a trans person?
- a. Are there things you can say or do to represent your gender identity to others online that you don’t think you would be able to do in “real” life (or vice-versa)?
 - b. Do you feel as though your online personas or avatars are extensions of your offline self? What connects them to one another, if anything?
10. Do you feel that it’s important for users to be authentic when presenting themselves online?
11. Are there limits to the number of online identities or personas a person can (or should) maintain at one time?

12. Tell me a little bit about your online friends -- do you have any? Where did you meet them?
- About what proportion of the people that you're connected to online would you estimate that you have met in person?
 - Do you ever worry about what your ties to other people might say about your own identity online? That is, do you worry that being visibly connected to certain people online might 'out' you, lead others to question your identity or perspectives, etc.?
 - Have you ever felt like you had to manage your friendships or your visible ties to other people/groups online, in order to present yourself in a particular way? Tell me a little bit about how you tried to do this.
13. How did you first decide to join [site they were recruited through]? Tell me a little bit about your first few months using it.
- Was it difficult to navigate?
 - Did you connect with others quickly? Were they people you already knew, or were they strangers?
 - How did you set up your initial profile? How did you decide what to include/exclude?
 - Do you remember what the first thing was that you posted to the site? What was it?
 - Are there things you post on [platform] that you wouldn't post in other online communities that you might be a part of? Things you wouldn't share with your offline friends?
 - Have you edited your profile since you first joined the site? Why did you decide to change it? What did you change (if you can remember)?
 - Have you ever tried to connect offline with someone that you first met through one of these sites? What was that experience like for you?
 - How do you think that others you meet online might interpret your profile? What kind of person do you think they think you are?
14. Do you believe that social media profiles should reflect their creators' identities? Is it 'inauthentic' to conceal some parts of your identity from others online, or to embellish some aspects of your identity?
15. Are there some sites or platforms that feel 'safer' or more affirming to you than others?

16. Which platforms do you try to cultivate a 'presence' on, and which sites do you 'lurk' or try to remain anonymous on (if any)?
17. Do you have to tailor your self-presentation to meet social expectations within some communities, but not others? Explain.
18. In general, are you "out" about your gender identity on social media? What types of things do you do to signal or reflect your gender identity to others online? Do the strategies you employ here differ from those you might use in the offline world?

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (INTERVIEW SESSION B)

Interview protocols for second-wave interviews were individualized, tailored to each participant. What follows is an *example* of such a protocol (designed, in this case, for participant Cameron), meant to offer readers an overview of how second-wave interviews were organized.

Second-Wave Interview Guide for Cameron (GSM-029)

Catching Up

How have things been going for you since the last time we talked? What's new for you?

How is library school going? (Would have started in September, per last interview.)

How is your partner doing? Any new partners in the picture since last time we talked?

Any changes to the way that you think about yourself or the way that you describe your identities since the last time we talked?

What happened after the "Incident at Bigot Chicken?" :)

Tumblr Questions

Last time we talked, you said that while you didn't necessarily consider yourself to be an active Tumblr user, you *did* still have a Tumblr account that you logged into every once in a while, so that you could look back at other folks' content. Given everything that's gone down with Tumblr since December, has that changed for you at all?

Have you seen other people that you knew and liked to read departing from Tumblr altogether? Where are they going? Can you tell?

Did you try to preserve any content -- either your own, or from others -- that was culled on Tumblr as part of the great purge? How has the purge impacted *your* use of Tumblr, specifically?

Last time we talked, you mentioned that there was a “big trans movement” on Tumblr that happened between 2012 and 2014. I want to ask you more about that -- what did you mean? What did that movement look like? What seemed to kick it off (if anything)?

You said that when you first joined Tumblr and came out as non-binary, folks were very affirming – you said, quote, ‘of course, everyone was like, yaaaasss, and posts a billion GIFs, and I told them my name was Cameron and everyone was like, yeah, that name fits you so well, look how cool you are!’ And there are other folks on this project who had similar experiences on Tumblr, at least early on in their process. But that resounding affirmation doesn’t seem to jibe with the stories that others on this project have offered about their experiences in the truscum vs. tucute trenches, and how when they came out on Tumblr everyone told them that they were pretending and that they weren’t dysphoric enough and that they weren’t doing enough to self- actualize. So I’m trying to mediate between these two different perspectives: the folks who tell me Tumblr was once genderqueer utopia, and folks who tell me Tumblr is this receipt-keeping, gatekeepy, callout-ridden hellscape. What was it to you, and what is it to you now: either? Both?

What was the truscum vs. tucute debate all about? I need my Discourse Historian here!

Tell me more about the “soft trans” movement that you mentioned, too. Where do you think that movement was born out of, and what does it look like now?

You joked last time we talked that you felt like the tendrils of Tumblr had extended into other spaces – you even said that there’s a long-standing joke about American U that says it’s like Tumblr IRL. And I want to revisit that with you – what tendrils do you see extending, and where do you see the evidence of that extension? And is it about Tumblr, or is it about social media?

Facebook Questions

What are the groups that you’re most active in right now? Are you active in secret or closed groups that I might not have been able to view by looking at your profile?

How did you choose your profile picture?

You have a TON of FB friends – maybe not #1 on this project, but definitely in the top 3. How do you keep track of them, and how do you keep track of your privacy settings?

Do FB groups ever shut down as an effect of the kind of blacklisting or “receipt keeping” you mentioned in your first interview? For example, in one of the FB groups that I’m a part

of recently, a splinter group that had just formed for younger folks was shut down wholesale and abandoned within three days because someone went around posting in other groups that this new splinter group was gatekeepy and that the admin used to be affiliated with some other gatekeepy group. The splinter group had only been operating for two days! They weren't gatekeepy yet – they had, like, four members, and no posts other than a welcome post. But someone had kept receipts. I'm wondering if you've ever seen anything similar – groups in jeopardy because of something that previous members might have been involved with or said.

Instagram Questions

It seems like you're not using Instagram as much now as you did in the past. Why did you stop? Why do some selfies, etc. get shared to FB but not to Instagram?

Other Platforms

I also want to ask another topic that's come up a lot in these interviews, and that's online community participation anchored around other elements of identity, like mental health. We already know from the existing lit that trans and non-binary young people are disproportionately vulnerable to all kinds of negative mental health outcomes: to depression and anxiety, to self-harm, to eating disorders, to suicidal ideation. And we know that there are lots of different reasons why this might be the case. But I'm wondering how online communities are helping to shape and inform that context for young trans-identified people specifically. So I'm wondering if you've ever spent significant amounts of time participating in online spaces that were organized around an identity or an affiliation other than gender dysphoria or gender non-conformity. If so, do you feel like spending time in those spaces changed the way that you thought about those elements of your identity? Did they help to anchor some elements of yourself, or make them seem more salient or more central in your life than they were before? Did they serve as a good source of SUPPORT and community for you?

Has the Internet helped you to find sexual identity, as well as gender identity? Helped you to know your body or to envision new forms of gendered self?

Tell me about some of the ways that you've used the Internet to find romantic partners. You mentioned last time that you'd first met one of your partners on Tumblr – do you use the Internet or social media to connect with potential partners now? What does that look like for you?

Do you present yourself or talk about your identities differently in spaces where you know that others are approaching you for romance or sex?

Tell me a little about how you're using Snapchat! Last time, you mentioned that Snapchat is really important to you, but Snapchat isn't one of the platforms that I've ended up following people on as a part of this project. I'd like to learn more about it, and how you see your use of Snapchat augmenting the other platforms you use.

Callout Culture

What does it mean to be 'called out' online? Have you ever been 'called out'? How did you deal with it? What are your thoughts on quote-unquote 'callout culture' – does it exist, or is it overdramatized? If it exists, what does it look like? Is it present everywhere, or only in some spaces? Do you see it extending into offline life, as well?

You said that people on Tumblr "love receipts." Do you think this is true in other spaces online, too – Twitter, for example? Or was Tumblr unique?

Personal Identity/Aesthetics:

Last time we talked, you said that at this point in your gender journey, so to speak, you don't feel like you have to perform for other people. The exact words you used were, "I don't feel like I need to externalize it to the people in my life in-person." You said that you're really 'over' worrying about how other people are reading you or reading your relationships. But then, at another point in the interview, you said that you feel labels are very important to you, and that settling on a label that feels authentic and that communicates your true self as precisely as possible is important to you personally. And while I don't think those two statements contradict each other, I'm curious whether you see them intersecting.

Some folks on this project have said to me that they use their quote-unquote 'aesthetic,' to convey information about gender – that while many of them do have a sort of core perception of their gender identity, they have different presentations or aesthetics that they put forward for other people within that same bracket. And I'm just curious about how you'd react to that statement. Do you feel like you have a consistent 'aesthetic?' What is it? How do you see your aesthetic as being connected to your gender identity, or are they disconnected?

Last time, I asked you whether others had given you flack about things like changing your identity label and your presentation over and over again, and you said, "The person that

gave me the most shit about that was myself. There are so many times in my life where I've been the most intolerant person – like, 'oh, if I can't figure this out, maybe I'm not really trans.'" And that statement really resonated for me, personally – I think a lot of us feel that way, especially if we'd built up a lot of anxiety about coming out and then we find that it's sort of anticlimactic, and folks adjust right away. But I also feel like those expectations and those anxieties – the negative self-talk we give ourselves about whether or not we're enough or whether we're legitimate – have to come from somewhere. And so I guess I want to ask you where you think that voice in your head came from – why you worried, once upon a time, that you weren't enough or that you weren't really trans.

You mentioned different contexts in which you feel like you have to depoliticize your identity or your presentation – for example, when you're at work. You were working for a nonprofit. Looking at the differences between your social media profiles, I'm wondering whether we can revisit that question and evaluate ONLINE spaces where you feel like you have to perform different visions or different representations of self. Like, last time, you mentioned that you worry about job recruiters or other unintended audiences combing through your profiles and finding things you might not have wanted them to find – but are there some spaces online that you feel are safer or where you feel you can be more authentic, and what marks those spaces for you?

Big question: do you think that we've managed to detach gender from embodiment, such that we're now able to conceive of gender as an aesthetic attribute rather than an embodied attribute? I heard one person on this project say to me that they think gender today is less about what kind of body you have and more about what your aesthetic is, and there are aesthetics that enable folks to blend gender and gender signifiers in ways that read as distinctly non-binary, instead of as androgynous or as mixing masculine and feminine elements. And I find that fascinating for a couple of different reasons, but the one I want to think about with you first is that yes, sociologists know that gender is performative – we've had this knowledge for decades. But hearing 14, 15, 16-year-olds describing their gender as performative – that's a more recent development. And even sociologists have tended to read performativity a little differently than, say, Judith Butler does, in that sociology as a discipline still labels the performance as quote-unquote gender expression, a separate entity from gender identity or our sense of gendered selfhood. But some folks in the sample are thinking about it differently – they're thinking about it in a more Butlerian way, thinking about identity as constituted by and THROUGH performance, such that there IS no essential self-identity – there's just the aesthetic expression, and that IS the self. This is a really long-winded way of asking you what you think about that – do you think of gender expression and gender identity as two separate things? And do you think that teens and young adults today read gender as an aesthetic production in a way that previous generations might not have?

Discourse and Boundaries

Last time, we had a big conversation about The Discourse – capital T, capital D. And you said that there have been several overlapping waves of Discourse about trans identity, about WLW and Sapphic identities, about non-binary identities, most of it centered around gatekeeping and who should be allowed to have access to X or Y identity label. And I know I don't have to tell you that this kind of boundary-policing is common in any and all identity movements. But what I'm wondering – and this is gonna sound like a weird question – is whether the online context and social media have shaped these boundary-policing processes in new ways. I'm wondering whether, in online spaces, where we have a little more control over how and whether we choose to represent our physical bodies and our real-time relationships, the labels themselves sort of supercede offline presentation and behavior – if the labels take on a greater significance or a greater salience, and so folks are even more motivated to protect and defend their claim to them. What do you think?

What do you think is unique about BDSM and poly identities? Last time we talked, you said that you'd never officially come out as polyamorous because people don't come out as polyamorous. And when you mentioned that you're active in BDSM-focused groups on Facebook, I started thinking about that, too – about how some elements of sexual identity are public and social and other elements are less so, and how we differentiate who we are from what we do. Do you feel like being poly or being active in BDSM are core elements of your sexual identity in the way that being queer is a core element of your sexual identity? If not, what's different about those things?

Do you feel like you would have been less likely to participate in or engage with this interview if you didn't know that I were also trans?

Generational Differences

Do you think that the way folks in your age cohort – the age cohort that we might colloquially call Gen-Z – think about and do gender is different from the way that folks in MY age cohort (millennials) do gender? How or how not?

Last time we talked, you said that you'd been born right on the cusp, and so you weren't really sure whether you identified more with Millennials or with Gen-Z. I really want to hear more about that, because that distinction's come up over and over again on this project. What do you feel distinguishes the two? What's different about these generations?

Are there differences in how they view gender?

Are there differences in how they approach presentation of self?

Are there differences in how they hold one another accountable for misbehavior?

ROGD

What do you think about this rapid-onset-gender-dysphoria stuff? Have you been following along with that?

I want to give folks an opportunity to push back against that narrative here, because YOU – trans and non-binary folks that came out online in the peak-Tumblr era, 2012-2014 – are the people that Lisa is talking ABOUT, but not the people that she's talking TO. Consider me your microphone: what do you think about this?

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT³² SELF-DESCRIPTIONS OF GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITIES

Participant #1: Avery (they/them or he/him)	
Gender	“I generally identify as agender, but I do fluctuate occasionally between male and female and therefore tend to identify with all of the above by calling myself non-binary and genderfluid.”
Sexual Identity	“Demisexual, pansexual, pan-romantic, and polyamorous.”
Sexual Attraction	“Okay. So, I am demisexual, which makes this question difficult. On the whole, I am sexually attracted to the same people I am romantically attracted to, but only after forming an even deeper, personal bond with them. That said, it's also more... nuanced? It's very difficult to phrase in a way that would answer a question like this. The trust needs to be there, and the deep personal connection needs to be there. That said, and possibly because of my orientation, I don't necessarily think physical attraction is entirely sexual? The desire to make out and/or cuddle with people is also very physical, requires less criteria than my romantic attraction answer, and is entirely divorced from sexual attraction.”
Romantic Attraction	“I'm attracted to people I consider aesthetically pretty, regardless of gender, who I also am able to be close friends with. This covers a large range of people, frankly, though it does require them to be some degree of progressive in terms of politics. I do tend to lean more towards male-presenting people than female-presenting people, but as I was assigned female at birth I have a sneaking suspicion based on my personal experiences that this is due to familiarity with dating male-presenting people as opposed to an actual preference for dating them. The description is pretty vague, but I do find that to be pretty accurate to my attraction: I find it very easy to become attracted to the idea of dating someone if I am good friends with that person.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Something on the aro[mantic] spectrum”; “queer”; “trans”; “asexual”	Genderqueer

³² Only non-pilot participants are represented in this Appendix; as pilot participants were not surveyed, their self-descriptions are not captured here.

Participant #2: Crystal (she/her)	
Gender	“Gender Non-conforming/questioning.”
Sexual Identity	“Heterosexual/Gynephilia.”
Sexual Attraction	“Women/Feminine.”
Romantic Attraction	“Women/Feminine.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Bigender”; “genderfluid”; “non-binary”; “trans woman”; “lesbian”	[N/A]

Participant #3: Brynn (they/them or she/her)	
Gender	“I am honestly not sure anymore. I used to think that I was just gender non-conforming male, but now I am not so sure. I think there may be more to it and I am still trying to figure that out.”
Sexual Identity	“I guess the simplest way is just to say I am gay and demisexual. So I prefer guys for the most part, but if I like you I like you regardless of what word you wear.”
Sexual Attraction	“I think I sort of accidentally answered this as a boy in the last question. Androgyny I have to say flips my switch every time. Big, muscly, or hairy guys are not my thing what so ever... Nor are people more that five years either side of my age.”
Romantic Attraction	“Honestly, people who are kind to me. Not as in they pamper me and spoil me, but that just genuinely care even before we are at all romantic. People who accept me for who I am regardless of the fact that at least right now I am a little confused on that.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Genderqueer”; “trans”	Asexual

Participant #4: Lyric (they/them)	
Gender	“Non-binary.”
Sexual Identity	“I generally ID as bi/queer.”
Sexual Attraction	“I’m generally drawn towards people with a more alternative style (punk, metal, etc).”
Romantic Attraction	“I generally tend to get into relationships with people I share common values with, generally into more of the affectionate type.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Trans”	[N/A]

Participant #5: Dov (they/them)	
Gender	“Non-binary, probably bigender or genderfluid but I don't worry about it too much.”
Sexual Identity	“Bisexual (attracted to same and other genders, gender matters in attraction), not interested in pursuing relationships with men.”
Sexual Attraction	“Bisexual (same and other, gender relevant).”
Romantic Attraction	“Bioromantic (same and other, gender relevant), less likely to be romantically attracted to men than other genders.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Trans”; “transmasculine”; “queer”	Lesbian

Participant #6: Fern (they/them)	
Gender	“Nonbinary.”
Sexual Identity	“Queer.”
Sexual Attraction	“...Queer, I think? Not really sure what this question means.”
Romantic Attraction	“Queer.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Trans”; “transmasculine”; “bisexual”	Lesbian

Participant #7: River (they/them)	
Gender	“Non-binary (specifically, androgynous); also intersex.”
Sexual Identity	“Omnioromantic and lithromantic asexual.”
Sexual Attraction	“N/A.”
Romantic Attraction	“I tend to have at least some romantic feelings for people by default; the people I tend to have the strongest feelings for vary a lot, but kindness is the quality I like the most, and I tend more towards people with something unique about them (both in terms of personality and appearance) rather than people who are more "normal". I notice that I tend to get crushes on more male fictional characters, and the real people I have crushes on are more often female or non-binary.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Biromantic”; “trans”	[N/A]

Participant #8: Malachi (he/him or they/them)

<p>Gender</p>	<p>“I have struggled a lot with how to best articulate my gender since I first came out. However, something that I have consistently said throughout these processes of uncovering more about myself, my relationship to femininity and masculinity, and the politics I possess is that "I'm not sure where I fall but I know I'm not a woman." Depending on the particulars of a specific situation (the people I am interacting with, their level of knowledge about the fluidity of gender and its social construction) my identity and presentation of my gender might take different forms. However, I do not wish to ever be associated with traditional masculinity and manhood, regardless of the way I appear. For this reason, while I present quite masculinely, I maintain a connection to femininity and androgyny (I have medium-long length hair, wear a single dangling earring on my right ear, etc.). When asked to categorize myself and my gender my go-to answer is that I am transmasculine, however, this does not feel totally accurate and precise. I have been toying with and contemplating different identity categories, in particular, the identity of non-binary trans guy, however this feels inaccurate also. Recently, the words that made me feel most comfortable when describing myself and my relationship to gender and gender presentation were: feminine guy. But that's feeling less accurate and precise now too... I'm somewhere between, through, and among non-binary trans guy, demiguy, feminine guy, and trans masculine. “</p>
<p>Sexual Identity</p>	<p>“This is another thing I've been struggling with a lot. Throughout my dating and sexual life, I have always been primarily attracted to and oriented towards what people would call "high femme" women. While I have always considered myself queer, even after my transition, I have never had a meaningful sexual or romantic relationship with anyone who was not, at the time we engaged with each other, a cis woman. However, this makes me uncomfortable and I have been attempting to deconstruct the reasons for this in order to become more in touch with my queerness and to open up possibilities for intimate relationships with non cis women. I believe that some of my discomfort with my patterns of romantic and sexual attraction has to do with my fear of being equated with cis straight men or being regarded as something similar.”</p>
<p>Sexual Attraction</p>	<p>“Again, another complicated question for me. I believe that I developed some very unhealthy and uncritical accounts of worth and beauty (regarding myself and others) throughout my life and throughout my process of coming out and transitioning/discovering. As I stated previously, I tend to date (and hook up with/have sex with) women who could be categorized as high-femme. A lot of my friends give me a lot of shit for this making comments about how I date "big eyed women who have model bodies filled with poison." (My dating/hook up history hasn't been too successful as many of my relationships are incredibly intense and end quickly or, similarly intense and unhealthy and span over a year and half). I have spoken with a lot of different trans masculine people who have expressed that they had/have similar habits (of dating/sleeping with/developing relationships with women who comply with models of traditional beauty). Furthermore, most of my sexual and romantic history has been with white women who identified as cis, and presented as high femme, at the time of our encounter/relationship. I do not believe that this pattern is necessarily intentional or speaks to my general patterns of attraction, however, this does not mean I am making a claim that it is uninformed by white-supremacist, anti-black and brown, and colonial logics of beauty and worth. I am looking to confront this pattern in my romantic/sexual life.”</p>

<p>Romantic Attraction</p>	<p>“I have only engaged in one sexual encounter that did not lead to some lasting/continuing intimate/romantic relationship. Again, this question is complicated for me because I do not feel that I have been totally honest with myself about who makes me feel romantic and who just makes me feel (if that makes sense). Before attending a college that is so densely populated with queer people, I had a habit of dating whoever expressed interest in me. This, I believe (based on things I said throughout middle school and high school), was because I thought that I was getting lucky and that I wouldn't find another person who wanted to be with me or was attracted to me. A classic turning on its head of the statement: "If not you then who, if not now then when." As a result, I became deeply infatuated with any girl/woman I met who expressed interest in me and this continued into the consciousness I possessed in college. However, this sort of logic left me with little time to get to know myself and my relationship to my gender. Since my sophomore year of high school I have had some sort of dating relationship with over twelve women. Many of these relationships ended disastrously and therefore I am not in contact with many of my exes. Furthermore, I have been struggling with my mental health for some time (more severely in the past two years) and can often mistake feelings of exciting instability and love. So, because of my history with dating and romance, I'm not sure that I have developed an awareness of what it is that I search for in potential romantic partners. I will say, however, that my last relationship, which I believe, in some regards, was one of my most honest relationships (it was also my longest, lasting 1.5 years) was based in a deep romantic attraction that had to do with the fact that the woman I was dating made me want to be a better person when I first met her (and not only for her but for myself and all the people who I love and who love me). I deeply value growth and center it in my life at all times so I can assume that this would be a big part of what would draw me to someone romantically.”</p>
<p>Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire</p>	<p>Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded</p>
<p>“Transmasculine”; “gay”</p>	<p>Bisexual; lesbian</p>

<p>Participant #9: Bradley (he/him or they/them)</p>	
<p>Gender</p>	<p>“Queer, non binary, trans.”</p>
<p>Sexual Identity</p>	<p>“Queer, gay, heteromantic.”</p>
<p>Sexual Attraction</p>	<p>“Women.”</p>
<p>Romantic Attraction</p>	<p>“Both women and men.”</p>
<p>Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire</p>	<p>Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded</p>
<p>[N/A]</p>	<p>Lesbian</p>

Participant #10: Ramona (they/them or he/him)	
Gender	“Nonbinary and genderfluid (sliding scale of masculinity to androgyny to femininity).”
Sexual Identity	“Lesbian/sapphic or wlw (women loving women - an umbrella term for women and woman-aligned people who love other women and woman-aligned people).”
Sexual Attraction	“Women and woman-aligned people.”
Romantic Attraction	“Women and woman-aligned people.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Trans”; “fem”	Demigirl

Participant #11: Kai (they/them, she/her, or he/him)	
Gender	“I am agender but I present very fem because I like the calming routine of more "feminine" fashion and make up/skincare.”
Sexual Identity	“Bisexual, leaning towards fem individuals.”
Sexual Attraction	“People with fem bodies and more traditionally feminine looks, but also masc occasionally.”
Romantic Attraction	“Any, as long as they are good people.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Intersex”; “queer”	Lesbian

Participant #12: Charlotte (she/her or they/them)	
Gender	“Trans-femme, Trans girl, Trans.”
Sexual Identity	“I’m a lesbian. Sex/relationships are kinda weird to me sometimes though. I think I have some emotional trauma related to both, plus being trans adds some extra body awkwardness.”
Sexual Attraction	“I like girls and fem-aligned people. I’m not too picky.”
Romantic Attraction	“I prefer people with some emotional maturity. People who are open and honest in their communication, don’t have petty reactions or overthink our interactions together. I mean what I say most of the time, and I want them to understand that and be about the same. Also they gotta be kinda nerdy/passionate.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Sapphic”	[N/A]

Participant #13: Sophia (she/her)	
Gender	“Trans woman.”
Sexual Identity	“Gay. Demisexual.”
Sexual Attraction	“Women who I’ve created some sort of emotional bond with and know they’re kinky.”
Romantic Attraction	“Women who are intelligent, enjoy discussing current events and underlying philosophical, moral, and ethical motivators and challenges behind them. They tend to be very excitable and bubbly with a strong moral compass, usually a bit stronger than mine. As well they must be kinky.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Lesbian”	Genderfluid

Participant #14: Rigby (he/him or they/them)	
Gender	"I just say "trans". Sometimes "transgender"."
Sexual Identity	"I say "queer" and sometimes "gay". I sleep with nbs, women, and men. In the past I have said "bi", but it isn't right for me now."
Sexual Attraction	"It's funny. I tend to like boys who look like me: lanky types, and women who look nothing like me: fat/round cuties. I am most drawn to other trans people. I'm also especially interested in people who look queer, people who are gender non-conforming or flag in other ways. I'm equally attracted to men, women and others. I don't sleep with straight people."
Romantic Attraction	"I don't think my sense of romantic attraction is much different than my sense of sexual attraction. The only group of people I'm not interested in dating are straight people."
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
"Transmasculine"; "trans man"; "non-binary"	Bisexual

Participant #15: Xan (he/him or they/them)	
Gender	"I originally came out as FtM transgender, but due to safety concerns I had to detransition. I then started referring to myself as non-binary."
Sexual Identity	"Asexual! I do not experience sexual attraction."
Sexual Attraction	"N/A"
Romantic Attraction	"It's hard for me to want to be in a relationship with someone, but I'm typically attracted to long hair, dark eyes, and pale skin."
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
"Trans"; "transmasculine"; "trans man"; "queer"; "bisexual"; "gay"	[N/A]

Participant #16: Presley (they/them)	
Gender	“Genderfluid, identifying as nonbinary but presenting just about anywhere on the spectrum on any given day.”
Sexual Identity	“Grey-asexual: sexual attraction to people is few and far between, though their gender identity definitely doesn't play a role in my infrequent attractions.”
Sexual Attraction	“Good, kind, funny people. I've dated people of all shapes and sizes and appearances, but its definitely the kind of person they are that attracts me.”
Romantic Attraction	“I have the bad tendency to fall a little in love to any one who goes out of their way to be kind and involve me in things - is it always romantic? No, but everyone I've ever been romantically attracted to does fall under that umbrella.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Trans”; “queer”; “demisexual”	Bisexual

Participant #17: Danny (he/him)	
Gender	“Male, in fairly binary terms. I identify as a transsexual man in private/among friends and close company and as stealth/a cisgender man (albeit a visibly/audibly gay one--I'm read as a man 100% of the time though) at work and in public.”
Sexual Identity	“Gay--Kinsey 6 gay. A fag.”
Sexual Attraction	“Typically: older, muscular men of all races and ethnicities, both cisgender and transgender (in the latter case, they'd need to be post-transition or at least as far along as I am). Tattoos and piercings are a plus for me, as is facial hair. Some sort of weird genetic call here, maybe, drawing me to other Jews and MENA people: I'm into big noses, big eyebrows...”
Romantic Attraction	“Someone who is calm, reasonable, and who doesn't anger or yell or becomes violent. I'm attracted to intelligence, tenderness, sensitivity... I met my current partner over our shared love of Samuel Delany.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
[N/A]	Bisexual

Participant #18: Cameron (they/them)	
Gender	“Nonbinary, genderfluid.”
Sexual Identity	“Bisexual.”
Sexual Attraction	“Mostly feminine people of all genders.”
Romantic Attraction	“Mostly feminine people of all genders, pretty much all genders except strictly cisgender men. I am polyamorous.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Trans”; “lesbian”; “polyamorous”; “queer”; “demiguy”; “intersex”	Transmasculine; bigender; genderqueer

Participant #19: Cassidy (she/her)	
Gender	“I am a female stuck in a guy's body. I am a transgender woman.”
Sexual Identity	“Asexual. I can only have sex with people if I have a deep emotional bond with them.”
Sexual Attraction	“Women and non-binary people.”
Romantic Attraction	“People.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Genderfluid”; “gray-ace”; “demisexual”	Non-binary; bisexual; pansexual

Participant #20: Milo (he/him or they/them)	
Gender	“Masc-aligned Nonbinary.”
Sexual Identity	“Polyamorous and pansexual.”
Sexual Attraction	“I tend to sway more towards masculine types.”
Romantic Attraction	“I get romantically attached to people I have known for at least a little bit (around 1-3 months).”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Bisexual”; “genderfluid”; “trans”; “transmasculine”; “demisexual”; “panromantic”	Asexual

Participant #21: Lee (they/them)	
Gender	“I identify under the nonbinary umbrella as agender. Specifically, I identify as agenderflux, because I fluctuate between more masculine and feminine from day to day while never fully identifying as either male or female.”
Sexual Identity	“Asexual.”
Sexual Attraction	“I do not experience sexual attraction towards any genders.”
Romantic Attraction	“I am romantically attracted to any and all genders, including trans/nonbinary identities.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Non-binary”; “trans”; “transmasculine”; “panromantic”; “queer”	[N/A]

Participant #22: Izzy (they/them or she/her)	
Gender	“I identify as a non-binary person.”
Sexual Identity	“I use the umbrella term "queer". I believe that sexuality for me has been on different areas of a spectrum throughout my life. I am primarily attracted to women, gender non-conforming people, and queer men on occasion.”
Sexual Attraction	“I am usually attracted to masculine or androgynous presenting women.”
Romantic Attraction	“People that are honest, attentive, affectionate, talkative, intelligent, passionate, generally calm, empathetic, consistent, determined, funny/humorous.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
[N/A]	Bisexual; lesbian

Participant #23: Sebastian (they/them)	
Gender	“Trans masculine, Non-binary, Genderqueer, Non-binary trans man, Transgender.”
Sexual Identity	“Gay.”
Sexual Attraction	“Men and non-binary folks.”
Romantic Attraction	“Men and non-binary folks.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Bisexual”; “queer”	Transmasculine; trans man

Participant #24: Jo (they/them or she/her)	
Gender	“Agender and nonbinary.”
Sexual Identity	“Bisexual with a preference for cis and trans men.”
Sexual Attraction	“I am generally attracted to "male" body parts, I assume this is mostly related to my dysphoria about my own "female" genitals.”
Romantic Attraction	“I have found myself romantically attracted to most people equally, unlike my sexual attraction.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Trans”	[N/A]

Participant #25: Jayde (she/her)	
Gender	“Woman, trans woman. Sort of nonbinary but I generally dont ID as nonbinary because I dont want my womanhood to be any more questioned than it already is.”
Sexual Identity	“Bisexual.”
Sexual Attraction	“Bisexual and into all sorts of types of people.”
Romantic Attraction	“Bi with a definite inclination towards the feminine. My policy for relationships is I only date trans people, dating a cis person sounds like dating an orangutan at this point (except the orangutan might have more interesting things to say).”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Femme”; “lesbian”; “Sapphic”; “queer”	[N/A]

Participant #26: Topher (he/him)	
Gender	“I am a transman/transgender man/transmale etc.”
Sexual Identity	“Queer.”
Sexual Attraction	“Still queer; I find myself usually attracted to AMAB bodies and AFAB bodies equally.”
Romantic Attraction	“I feel most romantically attracted to women/female-identifying persons than men/male-identifying persons.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
[N/A]	[N/A]

Participant #27: Luca (he/him)	
Gender	“Trans Masculine with a hint of ???”
Sexual Identity	“Queer.”
Sexual Attraction	“People who I know for a long time. Demisexual.”
Romantic Attraction	“People I share things in common with or find aesthetically attractive.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Non-binary”; “bisexual”	Genderfluid

Participant #28: Kyrie (they/them or she/her)	
Gender	“Non-binary. I don't feel like "me" is attached to a gender at all.”
Sexual Identity	“Asexual panromantic.”
Sexual Attraction	“Totally absent. I'm asexual. It's kind of weird for me to think about. It seems like constant sexual thoughts about other people would be invasive and annoying.”
Romantic Attraction	“Oh heck. Literally everyone who seems nice. I have absolutely no preference. Everyone's beautiful. My partner currently is genderflux and I think she's wildly attractive no matter how she presents.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Queer”; “genderqueer”	[N/A]

Participant #29: Julian (he/him)	
Gender	“Male (FTM).”
Sexual Identity	“Attracted to both predominate sexes, but any gender (bisexual/pansexual).”
Sexual Attraction	“Older people (23-30) of any race/ethnic group, gender, sex, etc . . . Though I do secretly prefer more able-bodied individuals.”
Romantic Attraction	“I usually like people who are similar to me, in that they're moreso a bit more reserved than clingy, but I also like anybody who sounds optimistic and likes to get out and do things.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
[N/A]	[N/A]

Participant #30: Cosmo (it/its or they/them)	
Gender	“That’s...complicated. I use the umbrella term of “nonbinary” to simplify, but my identity is much deeper than that; it’s a thing that is both intricate and nebulous, both tangible and just out of reach. In any case, it’s far too messy to neatly package in a label that typically translates as “neither”. I perceive myself as removed from standard ideas of gender, yet not without gender— it’s just that my gender is my own, it’s as individual as my own self and, given the nuances of any individuality, it requires a personalized identifier. There’s a label for it, I just haven’t created one yet. I exist outside the traditional Western gender binary, yet have days where I might feel a tiny bit closer to an air of the traditionally “feminine” or a touch of the traditionally “masculine”. My experience of my own gender is mercurial. My conceptual identity is something I still struggle to explain concisely or put into any other simplified terms, smaller words that lack the broad vagueness of just saying “nonbinary”. If I absolutely had to wrap up my gender identity in just a few words, I suppose those words would have to be: Queer, In Every Possible Sense.”
Sexual Identity	“Pansexual or simply “queer”. Anyone of any gender can be attractive, yet my orientation might fall somewhere close to demisexual.”
Sexual Attraction	“I’m usually more attracted to other trans, nonbinary, and Gender Non-Conforming persons. Sometimes I’m more into more masculine bodies, sometimes more feminine bodies are more appealing, and androgyny is always attractive. Cis people aren’t a strict exclusion. I consider myself to be grey-ace, somewhere shifting on the asexual spectrum, so my attraction usually falls under aesthetic before it becomes sexual. Sometimes I experience outright sexual repulsion. It’s circumstantial. I don’t know if there’s a term for all of that...”
Romantic Attraction	“That goes the same way... I’m more romantically attracted to trans, nonbinary, and GNC persons, but I’ve fallen for cisgender individuals in the past and I still occasionally experience romantic feelings that fall outside of my preferences for others that more like myself. Likewise, I consider myself to be grey-aromantic... even with aesthetic, platonic, sensual, and/or sexual attraction present, it can take me a while to develop actual romantic feelings for someone.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Trans”; “genderpunk”; “genderfuck”; “aromantic”; “aroflux”; “bisexual”	[N/A]

Participant #31: Vinny (they/them)	
Gender	“God, what a question... short answer: not cis. Long answer: female aligned non-binary?”
Sexual Identity	“Lesbian. I love girls so much haha.”
Sexual Attraction	“Female aligned people. Occasionally I am attracted to masculine people but predominantly I love women and other feminine and female aligned folks! Or super neutral androgynous folks even.”
Romantic Attraction	“I have a really hard time with being romantically intimate with cis men. I can be romantic with all women ever tho lmao this is really hard to write about! I’ve never put this much thought into it! Thanks for asking me to put words to it. This is helpful to me.” :)
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Polyamorous”; “asexual”; “queer”; “trans”; “butch”	Bisexual; pansexual

Participant #32: Marcel (he/him or they/them)	
Gender	“Transmasculine, nonbinary, faggot.”
Sexual Identity	“Bi.”
Sexual Attraction	“I am mostly sexually attracted to men and nonbinary people. I am rarely attracted to women in a sexual way.”
Romantic Attraction	“I’m romantically attracted to people of all genders.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Queer”; “transmasculine”; “gay”	[N/A]

Participant #33: Charlie (he/him or they/them)	
Gender	“Uhhh somewhere on the nonbinary spectrum. More like trans masc nonbinary/gender non conforming.”
Sexual Identity	“Demisexual? I'm not 100% sure lately.”
Sexual Attraction	“I believe pansexual attraction. I'm not attracted to any one gender identity more than others.”
Romantic Attraction	“I typically feel romantically attracted to people that identify as females.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Trans”; “queer”	Pansexual; bisexual

Participant #34: Aurora (she/her)	
Gender	“I describe myself as a transgender woman. It's what feels most comfortable and accurate.”
Sexual Identity	“I would describe myself as a queer lesbian. I use that as how I quickly define my sexual orientation because I'm 96% attracted to women exclusively, but I'm also attracted to other gender nonconforming individuals, regardless of what they're assigned at birth.”
Sexual Attraction	“Honestly pretty much the same as above. Women primarily (absolutely including trans women), and some other queer folks. I find people with more feminine characteristics to be more attractive (i.e. femme more than butch), and I can't really think of a way to expound upon that further at this very moment.”
Romantic Attraction	“My sense of romantic attraction is fairly similar to what's listed above. Almost exclusively women, though I get the occasional passing emotional attraction for really good friends of any gender, but if they're men they fade quickly, if that makes sense.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Polyamorous”	[N/A]

Participant #35: Parker (they/them or she/her)	
Gender	“I am nonbinary. Sometimes I call myself nonbinary femme since I am extremely feminine aligned. Sometimes I feel gender neutral, which has often been my case after an extremely horrible breakup.”
Sexual Identity	“I am demisexual, whether that be directly due to repeated sexual assault or due to how I perceive myself and values I only hold to myself, I am unsure. I only feel and want to be sexual with someone I trust and love deeply. Thinking about sex with anyone else often makes me feel sick and, sometimes, causes me to have panic attacks.”
Sexual Attraction	“I’m not sure if I have a type honestly. I have loved and have been sexually attracted to many types of people.”
Romantic Attraction	“I think I’m attracted to people who are empathetic and soft, much like myself. Especially if they can relate or have similar issues. I’m attracted to people I can seemingly have endless conversations with and people I trust.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
“Queer”; “bisexual”; “trans”; “asexual”	Transmasculine; trans man

Participant #36: Violet (she/her)	
Gender	“I fully, 100%, identify as female.”
Sexual Identity	“I identify as lesbian!”
Sexual Attraction	“I tend to be attracted to all types of women, but it ends up with me being attracted to more butch leaning women, as I do identify as femme.”
Romantic Attraction	“Romance is even more so defined by my sexual attraction, as I feel romantic attraction to women who treat me highly and give me a lot of attention, and the ones that do this 99% of the time do identify as Butch.”
Identities Claimed/Acknowledged in Interview, But Not in Questionnaire	Identity Labels Previously Held, But Since Discarded
[N/A]	[N/A]