ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	TALK AMONGST YOURSELVES: 'COMMUNITY' IN TRANSGENDER COUNTERPUBLIC DISCOURSE ONLINE, 1990-2014
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Since the mid-1990s, digital technologies have played a key role in major political actions and social movement organizations in the US and elsewhere. Newly widespread public internet access mitigated issues related to geographic limitations or cost-prohibitive print media, allowing otherwise-disparate groups to more quickly and easily communicate and organize. Transgender individuals were particularly well-positioned to benefit from the growth in digital technologies, which supported an active and growing transgender social movement throughout the 1990s. Both recent scholarship and popular media have focused on digital technologies as key sites of visibility, social support, and political organizing for transgender individuals.

However, few scholars have also focused on the specific technological infrastructures that underlie these discussions. This dissertation remedies this gap through an analysis of digital communications' impact on transgender social

movement organizing from 1990 to the contemporary moment. Using critical and multi-modal discourse analysis, I analyze how users past and present develop their understanding of what "transgender community" should be, and the ways different platform-specific affordances shape these understandings. My approach is grounded in platform studies: focused on the interrelationships between platforms, platform design, and the discourse produced on these platforms, while also paying close attention to the social and cultural factors that influenced a platform's design. I take a case study approach, with each chapter focused on a different platform or dataset, from 1990s transgender periodicals, archival data from Usenet newsgroups, ethnographic interviews, informational websites, to social media platform Tumblr. Throughout each of these chapters, I draw attention to how platform affordances inform users' emergent understanding of "transgender community" as a homogenous entity—obscuring key differences, disconnects, and inequalities amongst users and within the identity category itself. Ultimately, I find that the possibilities for online political organizing are constrained by the digital platform's modes of circulation and its encoded social norms, as power is channeled away from those who need it most.

TALK AMONGST YOURSELVES: 'COMMUNITY' IN TRANSGENDER COUNTERPUBLIC DISCOURSE ONLINE, 1990-2014

by

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Dedication

To every weird kid who, like me, found their voice online.

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Introduction: “A Big Worldwide Electronic Hug”

As she recounts it, Terri Main was timid the first few times she interacted with other transsexuals. Yet after a few meetings, “everybody made [her] feel so welcome.” She relaxed, because now she had “found people who understood how I felt, because they had felt the same things. They provided encouragement, support, advice, friendship, even a shoulder to cry on occasionally” (1991: 17). And their support was crucial to her own personal transition: at their urging, she got in contact with a counselor and started planning for sex reassignment surgery. However, Main wasn’t visiting a traditional support group in a therapist’s meeting room or a welcoming church’s basement. She was meeting folks in the GenderLine section of Compuserve’s Human Sexuality Forum, part of the CompuServe Information Service (often abbreviated to CIS), the first major US-based commercial online service provider (Banks 2008). Main’s essay on her experiences in GenderLine was one of several to be selected for publication as part of *CompuServe Magazine*’s Member Essay Contest.[1] Next to her essay is a photo of a smiling Main, fingers perched above an early model laptop’s keyboard—as if she’s been caught a second before logging on to GenderLine. For Main, being able to chat with other members and use the Forum’s files made a “significant difference” in her life:

> “It sounds strange to talk about electronic impulses this way, but I could feel love radiating from the computer screen. Sometimes when you live in the twilight region between genders you just need a hug from someone who cares. The conferences were like a big worldwide electronic hug” (1991: 17).

[1] Readers had differing reactions to Main’s essay, as evidenced by two letters published in the February 1992 issue of the magazine. One letter writer described her essay as “both well-written and moving” while another complained that it was in “poor taste” for CompuServe, as the publisher, to “bring what the general population considers perverted into respectability” (1992, p. 4).

At the time, Main was just one of an increasing population of trans individuals who were making connections and organizing online. Since the mid-1990s, digital technologies have played a key role in major political actions and social movement organizations in the US and elsewhere. Newly widespread public internet access mitigated issues related to geographic limitations or cost-prohibitive print media, allowing otherwise-disparate groups to more quickly and easily communicate and organize. Transgender individuals were particularly well-positioned to benefit from the growth in digital technologies, which supported an active and growing transgender social movement throughout the 1990s (Wilchins 1997, Whittle 1998). Both recent scholarship and popular media have focused on digital technologies as key sites of visibility, social support, and political organizing for transgender individuals (Gauthier & Chaudior 2004, Hill 2005, O'Riordan 2005, Rawson 2014, Shapiro 2015, Raun 2016, Cavalcante 2016). Trans individuals consistently pick the internet and trans websites as one of the most important online information sources in a variety of information surveys (Taylor 2002; Adams and Pierce 2006; Beiriger and Jackson 2007; Pohjanen and Kortelainen 2015), and the majority of contemporary trans-related sites are maintained by trans-identified individuals to provide community resources (Horvath et al. 2012).

However, few scholars have also focused on the specific technological infrastructures that underlie these discussions—if they're mentioned at all. Instead, the technology was merely a vehicle for the social or political communication. To return to Main's metaphor, they focused on the affective feeling of the hug, but not what had made the hug possible. This dissertation, *Talk Amongst Yourselves: Conceptions of "Community" in Transgender Counterpublic Discourse Online, 1990-2014,* remedies this gap through an analysis of digital communications' impact on transgender social movement organizing from 1990 to the contemporary moment. Using Critical

and Multi-Modal Discourse Analysis, I analyze how users past and present develop their understanding of what "transgender community" should be, and how these understandings are shaped by different platform-specific affordances. I take a case study approach, with each chapter focused on a different platform or dataset, from 1990s transgender movement publications, archival data from Usenet newsgroups, ethnographic interviews, informational websites, to social media platform Tumblr. My approach is grounded in platform studies: focused on the interrelationships between platforms, platform design, and the discourse produced on these platforms, while also paying close attention to the social and cultural factors that influenced a platform's design.

Communities and Counterpublics

Given the presence of "community" throughout user discourse, it would seem a natural choice as a conceptual model of understanding trans individuals' social interaction online. However, "transgender community" is such a broad and ideologically loaded concept that it ultimately lacks fine analytical meaning. Instead, I've chosen to adopt a counterpublic model, which focuses my attention on what discourse participants take as their focus: the circulating texts and discourse that address them. For many of the cases I study, these texts exist outside of mainstream discourse, and encounter with them is transformative for readers, giving them the tools they need to claim a transgender identity. These texts encourage readers to challenge the dominant cultural understandings of sex and gender and claim their identity as part of a public in public (Warner 2005). The formation of such "parallel [online publics] visible to participants in the public at large," have a particular power in their modelling of an alternative to "the traditional and exclusive public sphere." (Travers 2003: 232).

A counterpublic framework, then, provides me with the "conceptual lenses" I need to consider discursive development, spread, circulation, and impact. Counterpublic theory "views the public sphere as a network of overlapping and intersecting discursive forums that arise asynchronously" (Asen 2015: 139). Instead of emphasizing homogeneity of opinion, these counterpublics are open to disagreement and in some cases, highly divisive discourse. Counterpublic theory forefronts such difference as "generative and productive"—in contrast to community's emphasis on homogeneity and coherence. In focusing on counterpublics instead of community, my project rejects the implied homogeneity of popular conceptions of "community" and forefronts the diversity and difference across online counterpublics. Using a counterpublic framework allows me to treat "community" not as a separate entity outside of discourse, but a fundamental part of and subject in the emergent discourse.

This heterogeneity is also borne out in the variety of objects of inquiry—Usenet groups, websites, social network sites (SNS)—considered in this project. For contemporary platforms in particular, the infrastructure of SNS have changed the way content, those texts and discourse, circulates. SNS, then, are networked publics, "simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (boyd 2014: 8). On SNS, content lasts longer, gains greater visibility, spreads further, and can be publicly searched via platform affordances—out of which emerge invisible audiences, collapsed social contexts, and the blurring of public and private (2014). As boyd notes, these features are not new to social interactions, but social media "alters and amplifies social situations by offering technical features that people can use to engage in these well-established practices" (2014: 11-13). As such, I study trans discourse on contemporary SNS as part of a "networked counterpublic," where the four main affordances of

the networked public (persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability) are used for a specifically counterpublic purpose (boyd 2014; Renninger 2014).

Chapter Outline

My first chapter examines how the public perception of digital communications' possibilities were informed by the concept of the "virtual community," a prominent framework in the mid-1990s for understanding social relations online. The influence of virtual community, and its emphasis on social relations grounded in a shared, idealized sentiment in particular, can be seen in transgender movement publications' coverage of the Internet. Throughout the mid-1990s, articles drifted from presenting the "world wide web" as a highly technical medium intended only for "hackers" to envisioning it as an approachable site for founding a new "cybergender movement" based in shared transgender sisterhood. My second chapter focuses on one specific platform in this new movement, Usenet, and use of the term "cisgender" in five major newsgroups—the only archival site where the term appears. The affordances for which Usenet was so well known—prodigious posting, extensive use of quoting, and limited moderation—allowed the term's reach to extend far beyond the small handful of posters who actively used the term. The modern incarnation of "cisgender," I argue, owes much to these users' focus on emphasizing gender performance and identity over being in the "right" body as the point of difference between trans and non-trans individuals.

My third chapter shifts attention to the contemporary moment, analyzing a set of 25 interviews with trans-identified individuals completed in 2013-2014. In it, I consider participants' information collection habits and their participation in transgender discourse, in order to get a better picture of the current discourse landscape and their conceptions of "community." As I find, search engines now act as key information brokers, guiding how

participants understand core transgender concepts. In the fourth chapter, I focus on a medium frequently mentioned by my participants, transgender informational websites, and examine their current function as archival documents offering a window into the recent history of web design and transgender discourse. Yet, as noted in my interviews, most contemporary users encounter these sites through search engine results, whose presumably objective algorithm strips them of their temporal contexts and represents them as current and contemporary resources. The resulting algorithmic vision of transgender concepts and politics users receive centers whiteness and respectability—a stark contrast to contemporary intersectional movements. In my final chapter, I analyze how trans Tumblr users develop a sense of place on the platform, facilitated through the platform's folksonomic tag architecture. Subcultural terminology become the "place" where trans Tumblr users live out their trans identity. In such a sharing-centered and tag-managed environment, however, user conflict over a tags' proper definition and usage illustrates the ways user-driven semantic categorization can ultimately limit users' ability to freely present and perform their individual gender identities.

Chapter 1: "Join the Cybergender Movement!": Defining Community in Early Transgender Organizing Online

1.0: Introduction

Community is everywhere. We live in them; they are housed in centers. They are beloved. Community suffuses political discourse. It is "an obsession… ubiquitous in the way we talk and think about life in the twenty-first century" (Creed 2006a, 1). Given the extent of its usage, you could assume there is a commonsense definition. In the academic literature, communities do share some common attributes like "longevity," "inherent stability," and "coherence," and members feel connected by their shared symbols and constitutive day-to-day practices (Willson 2010, 751). However, these attributes don't unify across disciplines and literatures into a singular definition. In example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists two primary definitions: "a body of people or things viewed collectively" and "a shared or common quality or state." Yet these two definitions have a combined 13 different sub-definitions, each with different gradations of specificity. Each category highlights a different aspect: collectivity, feelings of affinity, shared local or national citizenship, ownership rights, shared religious beliefs, and participation in online platforms (OED, "Community, N." 2016).

The variance in meaning can be deceptive, however, and it's tempting to assume "there is no common meaning [of community] deserving analytical attention, which allows implicit meanings to go on doing ideological work" (Creed 2006b, 47). This work, in simpler terms, is community's universal positivity. The earliest framework for community, theorized by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies and expanded by Max Weber, positions community (g*emeinschaft*) as grounded in personal ties in contrast to the alienating impersonal society (*gesellschaft*). In contemporary discourse, community stands as an unquestionable social good,

mnemonically signaling values of "caring, selflessness, [and] belonging" (Joseph 2002, vii). It is the nostalgically imagined "before" picture to contemporary society's chaotic, disconnected "after" image (Rose 1999, 172). "Community" is, concludes Raymond Williams, a "warmly persuasive word" that "unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.) seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term" (2014, 76).[2]

These implicit meanings of "community" and the ideological work they do is at the heart of this chapter.[3] Following Creed's admonition that "online community" cannot be studied with attention being paid to the concept of "community" itself (2006b, 47), I begin one of the questions that first got my started on this project: why community? I investigate what makes community such a meaningful and attractive concepts for political or civic purposes. I then discuss how community, in the form of "virtual community," became the governing framework for understanding social interaction online. These positive associations, alongside a set of techno-utopian political ideals emphasizing social transformation through technology, are at the heart of what made "virtual community" so attractive to both corporations and the popular

[2] Some have positioned "network" as Raymond Williams's unspoken oppositional term, with networks serving as the dispersed, fluid, postmodern alternative to the coherent, stable, homogeneousness of the modernist community (Willson 2010, 751; see Willson 2010 for a comprehensive literature review of work on the two frameworks). As Willson notes, when a person, be they politician, activist, or researcher, chooses to adopt "community" as their guiding framework a whole host of "attitudes about sociality, individual and collective relationships and broader philosophical positions can also be inferred" (2010, 754). Whereas language around community is often "value-laden," networks are spoken of in objectivist and scientific tones—emphasis placed on the variety and possibilities of connections through personal action ("to network") (2010, 753). However, "exhortations for action by 'networks with loose ties'," Elizabeth Frazer argues, lack "a certain something that appeals to community do not lack" (1999, 84-85). Frazer points to a variety of groups and organizations who have, in her terms, "perfectly serviceable descriptive [names]," yet still rely on "community" as a key predicate concept. The political and social "pay-off" of this use, as she puts it, is in encouraging members' experience of community—their "aspiration to a kind of connectedness that transcends the mundane and concrete tangle of social relations" (Frazer 1999, 83)

[3] In this project, I'm not interested in proving or disproving the existence of community online, nor the internet's consequences on "community" at large. Instead, I view community as a "useful heuristic [tool] to think with," one which does not hold answers but is a "[repository] of questions we should be considering" (Amit and Rapport 2002, 162).

imagination in the 1990s. At this point, I stay in the same approximate time period, but shift my focus to the then-burgeoning transgender social movement. This period was a key moment for transgender organizing at large, as a disparate group of individuals who had shared desires and practices were beginning to be constituted under the umbrella identity of "transgender." While much discussion around the adoption of transgender happened offline, digital communications were playing an increasingly important role in transgender politics. Here I investigate how the transgender movement press shifted from presenting digital platforms as the purview of "techno-snobs" and "hackers" to an important site of trans "sisterhood." In changing their ideological framing, transgender publications re-enact the paradox by seeking a pure community ideal which works to obscure the challenges and limitations of online spaces. I conclude with a consideration of what it would mean to think of community beyond the paradox. Building on the work of French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy and Michelle Willson, I argue for a community that emphasizes not measurable variables but passing moments of affective sentiment that arise from the interaction of individuals and digital platforms.

1.1: The Paradox of Community

In political and academic literature, community serves two functions which are, at their core, deeply and paradoxically intertwined. The first is community as a beloved value or ideal, the community rhetorically deployed by countless activists, organizers, and political actors. Community, in these framings, is the ideologically loaded social good, binding disparate individuals together though shared investment and sense of purpose. This is the community Robert Putnam bemoans losing in his oft-cited 2001 book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. The second function is what Putnam's text attempts to measure: community as an identifiable social phenomenon, whose features can be described and

cataloged as a set of generalized variables like civic organization membership. By applying these variables and finding them absent, he can then argue that community has "collapsed" in the mid-1990s. This act of measurement is key to Putnam's argument, where his numeric variables serve as objective embodiments for the less measurable, more messy affective "sense of community" that Americans lack. Put another way: in order to be able to draw attention to something that's not there, one has to know what was supposed to be there in the first place.

Putnam's text, then, serves as a core example of the community paradox, where the two functions form the heart of a circular argument: to invoke community as an ideal involves an inherent assumption that its variables must necessarily be apparent, or inversely, that the appearance of these variables inherently implies the existence of community sentiment.[4] One cannot exist without the other being called forth in some form and guiding how we understand the topic at hand. Most often, this paradox becomes apparent in the act of defining any given community, from the macro level of an identity category like transgender to the daily interactions of a neighborhood association or World of Warcraft guild. To be a community, no matter the level, implies boundaries and membership criteria, inclusion and exclusion. Iteratively determining, maintaining, and reinforcing these boundaries, then, forms the core work of community members. This work can be as simple as greeting a guild member when they log on to engaging in long debates about what criteria are necessary before one can legitimately claim to be "transgender."

These actions are key to creating a shared sense of community amongst members. In their oft-cited framework, Chavis and McMillan define "sense of community" as "a feeling that

[4] These two are not disconnected, for "community as an ideal begs the question of community as a descriptive category" (Frazer 1999, 76).

members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (1986, 9) They further break this definition down to four key elements: membership, shared emotional intimacy, a sense of social influence or of "mattering," and fulfillment of one's needs (1986, 9). As with community, however, these elements serve as testable variables, whose appearance or lack thereof allows one to prove if the idealized community in question exists. Instead, I prefer to think of "sense of community" in terms of Frazer's particularly illustrative example:

> "If members of misery-sharing groups or formations ever experience themselves as a community, or if an outsider is tempted to describe them as a community, it is because they are engaging in the kind of productive, augmentative sharing that such groups can sometimes achieve—where the little there is stretches further, or where the miserable food is a feast because of the social setting in which it is consumed" (1999, 84).

In the last 1980s and early 1990s, increasing attention was diverted to a new possible site for that "social setting:" the internet.

1.2: Forming "Webs of Personal Relationships" Online: Virtual Community

In order to get a full sense of the reverent technological rhetoric regarding online platforms and the personal computers people used to access them in the early 1990s, we have to locate this shift in context to the perception of computers prior to the mid-1980s. During the 1970s, computers, and by extension the platforms designed to run on them were primarily presented as "Orwellian," bureaucratic tools. As Fred Turner recounts, "throughout the 1960s, computers loomed as technologies of dehumanization, of centralized bureaucracy and the rationalization of social life, and, ultimately, of the Vietnam War" (2006, 2). However, this attitude begins to shift in the mid-1980s into the early 1990s—a change best epitomized by the iconic Apple "1984" commercial. Visually and textually invoking George Orwell's iconic novel

1984, it opens on a Big Brother-like figure commemorating the creation of a technological "garden of pure ideology—where each worker may bloom, secure from the pests purveying contradictory truths" as grey, identical beings march in lockstep. Their enemies, cast out from the garden, "shall talk themselves to death and we will bury them with their own confusion." His speech is cut short when the nameless heroine, dressed in running gear, smashes the screen, and the watching masses are shocked to attention by the explosion. The commercial closes with a narrator intoning portentously, "On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like '1984.'"

This commercial equally encapsulates the political values driving designers and participants in the earliest computer-based discussion platforms: suspicion of bureaucracy, a deep commitment to ideological independence, and an embrace of technology as a burgeoning source of personal empowerment. As Turner chronicles in *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, these values originate out of what he terms "New Communalist" philosophies: suspicious of all hierarchical structures, these thinkers rejected technocratic bureaucracy and emphasized "the self [as] the ultimate driver of social change." For if, quoting from Turner, "class was no more, then individual lifestyle choices became political acts, and both consumption and lifestyle technologies—including information technologies—would have to take on a newly political valence" (2006, 36-38). For New Communalists, these changes came in their attempts to achieve new, shared consciousness in communes, emphasizing social development through the use of small-scale, individualized technologies. Though all of these social experiments were to eventually fail, participants carried the political ideals that fostered them forward into a new medium: the computer.

While early New Communalists were focused on re-imaging society through new settlements and small-scale technologies, the philosophies later took root through the work of Stewart Brand and the WELL (or Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link). In design, the WELL embodied a whole collection of New Communalist beliefs, from lack of formal hierarchy, user self-governance through technology, and maintenance of relationships through social sharing and gifts (Turner 2006). It is "under the rubric of a New Communalist vision of a community of consciousness," Turner argues, that "this blend of emotional interconnection and informational labor gave rise to one of the most influential frames with which we have since understood the Internet: virtual community" (2006, 158). Prior to the publication of Rheingold's book, research into communication online had focused primarily on interaction in commercial or business settings (2006, 280, n. 53). Like Putnam (2001), Rheingold approaches community through a nostalgic lens, bemoaning a loss of "sense of community" precipitated by technology. For him, "the fact that we need computer networks to recapture the sense of cooperative spirit that so many people seemed to lose when we gained all this technology is a painful irony" (1998). At its core, he understands community as an ideal at risk, and this is reflected in his text, which emphasizes the affective value of different virtual communities for their users. At its core, Rheingold's definition of virtual community, "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace," focuses on practices that center affect (1998). [5] In line with the philosophies that inspire it, his definition eschews hierarchy and

[5] In the 2000 edition of *The Virtual Community*, Rheingold adds a new chapter where he engages with a variety of popular and scholarly critiques of "virtual community" that emerged in the seven years since the book's original publication. Rheingold acknowledges his own misguided attachment to nostalgic ideals of community and attempts to distance himself from them. Professing a preference for Wellman's "social network" framework, Rheingold notes he "could have saved us all a decade of debate by calling them 'online social networks' instead of 'virtual communities'" (Rheingold 2000, 359). However, I'd argue this chapter ultimately fails to engage with the engine

bureaucracy in favor of a focus on affectively driven "webs." To return to Apple's "1984" commercial, in the "virtual community," users could discuss and debate a variety of "contradictory truths" outside of the corporate "garden of pure ideology," in Rheingold's (and others') view not "[talking] themselves to death," but potentially "[revitalizing] citizen-based democracy" (Rheingold 1998).

Rheingold's vision is firmly embedded within community as ideal, emphasizing not the practical maintenance but Frazer's "productive, augmentative sharing" that fosters one's sense of community (1999, 83). In this way, then, Rheingold's virtual community is not primarily a descriptive category (though his text does attempt to perform this function) but at its core an ideal grounded in "sense of community"—not the labor involved in its maintenance, but the *affective experience* of community. Rheingold's formulation, by focusing on the affective, elides community members' labor in supporting and maintaining their shared social space and the exchange of information that happened therein. The WELL also presented unrecognized economic gains for its members through the use of crowd-sourced labor, and "the rhetoric of community provided the ideological cover necessary to transform a potentially stark and single-minded market transaction into a complex, multidimensional act" (Turner 2006, 158). This obscuring reflects a larger challenge in adopting community as a framework: The ways it obscures and leaves unacknowledged the economic and labor aspects of making a space hospitable for community sentiment. For while "sense of community" is enticing in its political power, it often belies the real material labor of organization and institutionalization necessary to maintain spaces where such a sense can be fostered: committee meetings, newsletters, or

that drives virtual community's continued use: the paradox of community. Instead, Rheingold focuses his energy on the evidence (or lack thereof) of community as "descriptive category," and does little to address its rhetorical power in discourse.

collective decision-making. As Frazer notes, “sense of community” cannot be acquired when “immiserated persons [fail] to share and thereby rise above their misery” (1999, 84).

It’s important to distinguish here, however, the difference between what I conceive of as work and labor. Work is, in this case, is the production of discourse and users’ social interactions. Responding to a posting, sharing a picture and tagging one’s friends, or liking a post would all qualify as work. Users, in discussion, engage with each others’ work, even if they may not think of it as work. Labor, in contrast, is made up of the necessary tasks that make work possible, but are neither politically attractive nor often socially advantageous. Labor is visible but fills the rarely acknowledged background unless it becomes noticeable as a failure. In a newsletter, labor is in layout, design, and printing, which most often draw attention to themselves only when there are typos, misaligned text, or unprinted pages. Online, labor is the design, construction, and maintenance of the platform. The platform is most visible as a designed object, instead of as a social space, when it fails: so, server downtime, posts gone awry, user-on-user harassment, or encountering unexpected constraints. In a corporately driven online media environment, platform-oriented labor is most often driven first by the corporation’s capitalist goals, which may or may not reflect user desires (van Dijck 2013). Alternately, platforms may rely on users’ volunteer labor to make said platform socially or commercially attractive to prospective users or investors. Users’ work requires labor, and the labor of the platform molds what kind of work users can or want to do. Just because labor often resides in the background makes it no less socially and culturally influenced—instead, its constructed nature is made invisible by its position.

The effects of this obscuring can be seen in the broad adoption of “virtual community” following Rheingold’s coining and popularization of the term. The “ideological valence” of

community Rheingold described was particularly attractive to corporations, who combined Rheingold's emphasis on social (instead of economic) activity and exchange with community's "warmly persuasive" ethos to obscure their own profit motives and cultivate user allegiance (Turner 2006, 161). The operationalization of "virtual community" is most apparent in the different visions presented by Rheingold and the work which follows him. Consider Porter's definition of "virtual community" in a 2004 literature review: "an aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported and/or mediated by technology and guided by some protocols or norms" (2004). Some basic elements of community are evident—"shared interest," "protocols or norms"—but the economic nature of this aggregation is foregrounded. Taxonomies of "virtual communities" begin to emerge, categorized by consumer need (Armstrong and Hegel 1995), members' orientation (Markus 2002), or site environment (Cheon and Ahn 2009). Sense of community is equally subjected to measurement, with the emergence of testable variables that are used to analyze the descriptive category "sense of virtual community" (Blanchard and Markus 2004; Abfalter, Zaglia, and Mueller 2012). Here again emerges the paradox, where evidence of one, either the descriptive category or the ideal, automatically serves as evidence of the other, made possible by the work of boundary definition.

Virtual community's influence reaches beyond shifts in corporate rhetoric and research frames, however. Social discussion platforms are, at their core, designed with the express intent of encouraging certain social behaviors and discouraging others (Ren, Yuqing, Kraut, and Kiesler 2007; Shen and Khalifa 2013). Platform design is not a socially innocent endeavor; the designer is just as likely as the politician, activist, or researcher to have their understandings of social relations shaped by the frame through which they approach them. Consequently, the

activist relies on appeals to community spirit to rally others to her cause, while designers make specific choices about a platform's affordances and constraints in order to encourage users' sense of community. The pre-structured nature of the online platform is designed with the express assumption users will fulfill the necessary set of variables, and the value of community sentiment is baked in through these design choices. Even the choice to use the term "community" over "network," "group," or "forum" can have an impact, for "when something is labels or conceived of as a community, members' expectations of what community relationships should be like are potentially consequential" (Creed 2006b, 44). The paradox of community is thus encoded into the platform itself: the use of affordances meant to foster the emergence of community as category become evidence of the community ideal, while the constraints or consequences are obscured.

As noted earlier, a major consequence of this is labor. Many platforms rely on unpaid user labor to for both content and governance. In example, sites such as Flickr and YouTube begin as community initiatives, with primarily user-produced content that was monitored by those users for misbehavior and abuse—a practice which worked as long as the platform remained small, (van Dijck, Kindle Locations 351-354). Once they grew, platforms increasingly implemented "professional and (semi) automated forms of governance," like reporting and blocking mechanisms, that function as encoded "social protocols" establishing platform behavior norms (van Dijck, Kindle Location 808).

The ideal is never far behind, however. The rhetoric of individualized empowerment and shared consciousness, particularly through language around "participation" and "collaboration," remains key to corporate presentation of platforms. As van Dijck puts it, "social media companies still seem eager to align the benevolent halo of early web technology with their

"alternative" corporate ethos" (Kindle Locations 277-278). The corporations that own contemporary social media platforms rely on users seeking out a sense of community in their communications to ensure consistent production of "behavioral and profiling data," that "golden egg their geese produced" (van Dijck, Kindle Locations 372-375). A user may have different affective reasonings behind their choice to "Like" something, but these aren't apparent to the audience unless communicated outside of established affordances. An increase in options merely provides a finer grain to the collected data. In order to get to the social media platform, however, we must better understand the context of these issues: the adoption of both "transgender" and the internet in movement discourse in the 1990s.

1.3: How We Got Here: Transgender Community in the 1990s

If community as ideal begs the question of community as category, then transgender as identity begs the question of transgender as community. While it has multiple originary threads, finding solidarity in a shared community was a key part of the push, spanning from the 1990s into the early 2000s, behind adopting "transgender" as the dominant term for various constituencies understood by a wider public as deviating from their birth-assigned gender (Valentine 2007; Murib 2015). Prior to transgender's broader adoption, movement publications sometimes used the phrase "the gender community" to signal a broad coalition of individuals who did not hew to binary gender norms in various ways. For transgender social movement organizations and activists, organizing a "transgender community" was central to their conception of what movement politics should be. In hir influential 1992 pamphlet "Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come," Leslie Feinberg argues having a shared language, "tools to reach out and win broader understanding," are key to the foundation of a larger social movement. Through their discourse and organizing, trans and gender non-

conforming individuals were "trying to find words, however inadequate, that can connect us, that can capture what is similar about the oppression we endure" (2006, 206). Adopting the term transgender, then, opens space for individuals to find solidarity within "our community" by adopting "a name connoting pride, a language that honors us" (206). As Feinberg articulates it, "transgender," in its invocation, would serve as a symbolic representation of an ideal "community." This invocation, as it was repeated in publications and adopted by a wide variety of individuals, would concretize the social setting necessary for the formation of a shared sense of community.

This reality was not to be, as political needs and broader public sphere adoption lead to a distinct narrowing of the term's focus and associated interest groups' political agendas (Valentine 2007; Murib 2015; Westbrook 2010). In the 1990s, social movement publications (often associated with then-dominant non-profits such as the International Foundation for Gender Education (IFGE)) promoting the term took a "textbook" approach focused on teaching readers how to properly use it—in the process producing "their own regime of knowability" that re-solidified transgender's borders (2010, 54). As the term moved into "official" spaces dominated by social service providers, conversely, "transgender" came to enclose a variety of identities into one space—including those who did not identify with the term (Davidson 2006; Valentine 2007). Transgender was thus transformed into a "nominal" identity, with an accompanying emphasis on a liberal civil rights agenda. In this way, the communitarian implications of transgender "strangle the unit(y) it was animated to support/foster" (Creed 2006b, 37)

Yet the desire for a sense of broader community remains potent. In response to concerns over exclusion, some individuals online aimed to linguistically defused sex/gender debate through use of the shortened form of "trans" which. Others also added an asterisk to the end to

form trans*, which "blends the [asterisk's] wildcard function with its use as a figurative bullet point in a list of identities that are not predicated on the trans- prefix formulation," such as intersex people and gender variant individuals why many not specifically identify as transgender or transsexual (Tompkins 2014).[6] In each case, modifications to the original term have been oriented toward increasing its inclusive possibilities—re-opening the term's borders to include a broader and more diverse constituency. This move re-articulates Feinberg's original desire for finding that sense of community in "words…that can connect us" (2006, 206) in a form uniquely influenced by technical design: the asterisk, in both search and some programming languages, as the container for an unsated (or unknown) list of possible endings or functions. In order to arrive at the environment from which trans* arose, we first have to understand trans attitudes toward the internet when it was first coming into wide use in the 1990s.

1.4: Building the "Cybergender Movement!": Transgender Community Online

"The gender community is in the midst of two revolutions right now," Stephanie Rose wrote in the inaugural 1991 issue of *Chrysalis Quarterly*, the print journal funded by the nonprofit American Educational Gender Information Service (AEGIS). The first was the ongoing growth of trans support groups, alongside an increasing shared political consciousness. The second, while more "covert," was no less important: "the computer revolution." Trans users specifically "[stood] to gain more from [the computer revolution] than any other social groups out there," as new communication platforms like bulletin board systems, or BBSes, allowed users to communicate securely and anonymously with each other (1991, 21). These two

[6] There's evidence in the Usenet archive, however, that this form of trans long predates its popularization on platforms like Tumblr. In particular, T* as a stand-in for a variety of identities, is used with some regularity on Usenet.

intertwined threads, transgender as identity and transgender as community, when linked to popular rhetoric around the boundless promise of the "virtual community," fused to produce a particularly hopeful discourse in transgender journals, newsletters and other community publications at the time. While these articles' readership and usefulness at the time of their publication is unclear, they offer a window into community participants' perceptions of the internet's possibilities—and the declining role of traditional organizations into the future.

The BBS was the one of the first online communication platforms to see wide public use. Users accessed a BBS by dialing in via modem to a BBS-specific phone number. Depending on the BBS, the user could either participate in the larger public forum, or private forums often only available to subscribers. BBSes outside of one's area code required a long-distance call, making them much more expensive to regularly access. Addresses for trans-specific BBSes begin appearing in trans movement publication *TS-TV (later Transgender) Tapestry* as early as 1988. Initially, they were listed in *Tapestry* as part of the resource directory, organized by geographic region, alongside other offline services and support organizations. Even though a BBS was technically not limited by geographic location, publishers used the BBS's area code of origin to determine its geographic location. Later, as the number of BBSes and other fora grew, they were given their own separate section. Administrators of these BBSes varied: while some were independent of existing organizations, others served as the digital home for pre-existing offline organizations. In *Tapestry*, personal ads also sometimes noted individuals' BBS memberships or participation in other formats. Alternately, individuals might subscribe to a service like CompuServe, whose Genderline forum offered a platform for trans-specific discussions. Online postings were sometimes spread by other means, such as being reprinted in print newsletters or collected in publications such as the "Gender Journal," a print journal edited by Genderline's

SysOp, or moderator, Jennifer Wells (Renaissance News, 1989). However, what coverage of online transgender forums was framed as a "technical" endeavor for the "computer literate" who "[knew] the lingo," or in one evocative turn of phrase, were "the 'hackers' in our community" (Renaissance News, 1989; Gardner 1994, 5).

In the mid-1990s, this focus would shift alongside wider cultural changes in internet access. Throughout 1994-1996 organizations such as AEGIS, the International Foundation for Gender Education (IFGE), and the Renaissance Education Association (REA) announced the launch of their own Internet presences. Just as Bryant Gumbel was inquiring to his skeptical Today Show co-hosts in 1994, "What is the Internet, anyway?" (Maya 2011), transgender publications began to publish articles on the "information superhighway." These articles were in the "explainer" model: all-in-one internet introductions, going over how to access, relevant tools such as modems, internet terminology and "netiquette," and how to find and join transgender-relevant groups. Transgender journal *Cross-Talk: The Gender Community's News & Information Monthly* in particular ran an 8-issue series from June 1994 to January 1995 entitled "The Information Highway and You" which provided not only information, but some contextualization of "early" transgender presences on the Internet.

These articles used media and governmental frames common to the era: the internet as a boundless network that was key to the community's future success (Kelly 2009, Greene 2016). This can be seen in their choice of terminology that evokes these frames: the "information superhighway," "cyberspace," accessing the "electronic frontier." JoAnn Roberts, owner of major transgender publisher Creative Design Services and editor/publisher of many transgender publications including *LadyLike* (a magazine for those interested in cross-dressing) and

Renaissance News & Views (hereafter RNV), best embodies these attitudes in a selection from her September 1994 RNV column, “Hot Buzz:”

> “One thing is for certain, if you're not on the net soon, you'll be cut-off from a major source of information. The baby-Bells are the most likely candidates to bring the information superhighway into your home in the very near future. Once that happens, it is quite possible that the very nature of how we run our daily lives will undergo what is called a paradigm shift, a fundamental change. But for all the hype about the Internet and Cyberspace, one thing puzzles me greatly. William Gibson, the author who popularized the term "cyberspace" isn't on the net. Think he knows something that we don't. Like, get a life, people.” (1994, 10)

In her unexpectedly prescient comments, Roberts (who would later become a great proponent of internet access in her publications, even adopting the moniker “CyberQueen”) expresses a mix of both interest and inevitability at the coming “paradigm shift” the internet represents. Even as she dismisses the futurist-oriented term “cyberspace,” implying it’s the provenance of those without a life, she recognizes just how much information will come through the Internet.

Internet explainer articles aimed to facilitate this evolution. Authors assumed their reader was not computer-savvy, one of those left behind by the “techno-snobs” (Roberts 1994) or a “virgin” in need of their “first kiss:” “the kiss of communication” (Louise 1994, 21). Authors relied heavily on existing metaphors and analogies to explain digital communications: the Internet as global telephone network or the BBS as a “clubhouse” where members got together to talk. Author Emily Clarke, in an article for *Cross-Talk*, constructs an extended analogy positioning the Internet as a digital version of the U.S. Highway system, with internet service providers (ISPs) as tollbooth operators and email addresses standing in for physical addresses (Clarke 1994). Alternately, some authors offered evidence of their own ignorance as proof anyone could use the internet. In a section of her article subheaded “Expertise,” author Brenda Thomas tells her readers, “I KNOW NOTHING ABOUT COMPUTERS…I can load a program and read instructions, and that is about as good as it gets. Lots of times I have to ask for help, but

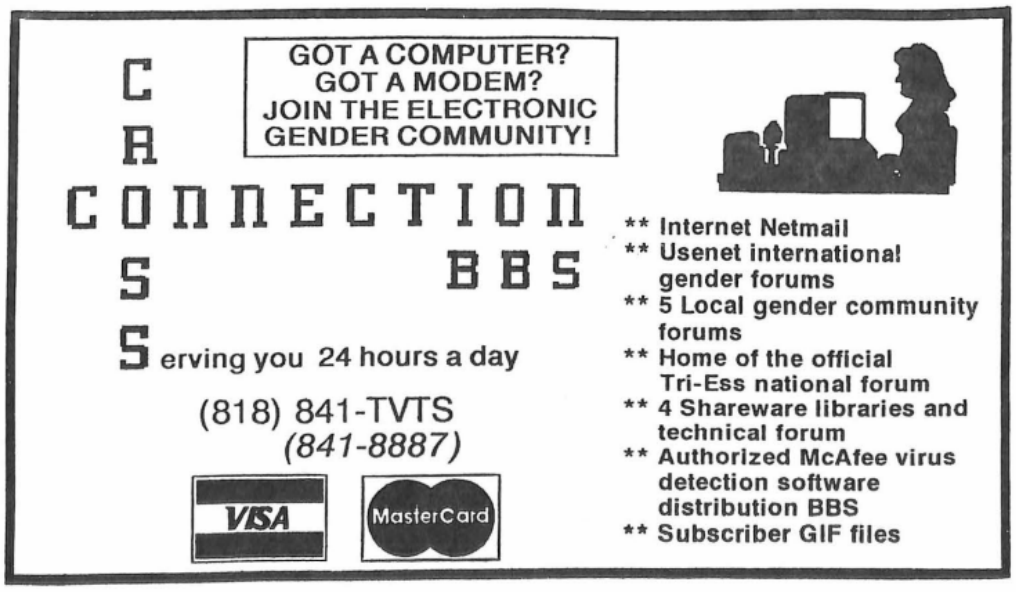
I readily find it on the BBS that I am on. So you do not need to be a guru to be able to access boards and have a lot of fun" (1995, 61).

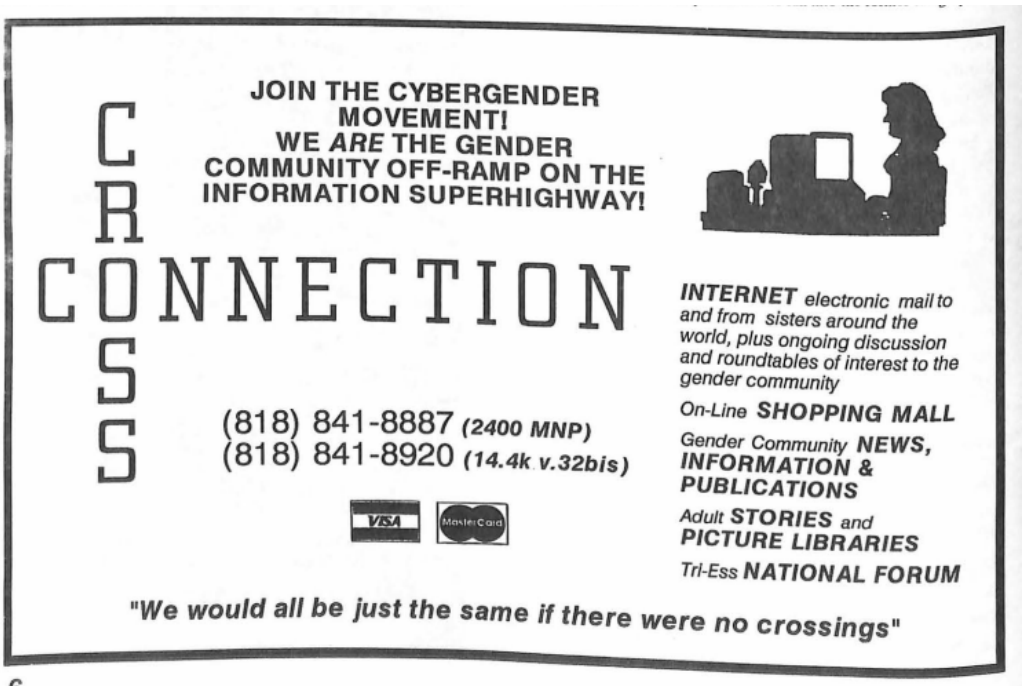
These articles explained in detail the mundane aspects of connecting to the internet at the time, such as modem bps rates, comparisons of relevant software and services, and the hardware start-up costs of getting "wired." The *Cross-Talk* series in particular spends several columns on the social aspects of internet use, such as the difference in domain suffixes such as .com, .net, and .edu or explaining "netspeak" such as now-common acronyms (AFK and BTW) and emoticons. Authors' presentation of monetary cost varied widely. Some, like Thomas, present the monetary investment, which she calculates (not counting the initial investment in equipment) as "a couple of hundred dollars a year, or less than $20.00 per month," as a small price to pay compared to the social benefits gained from Internet access (1995, 61). However, getting connected was not always a cheap endeavor. A 1996 article on web-surfing with an older machine, "The Little Mac That Could," set the minimum cost for an entry-level system at $500, while another writer estimates access as requiring "an investment of about $1000 in a computer system, software and a SLIP/PPP account" (Renaissance News & Views 1995; Kirkland 1996). Only one author, Clarke, presents the cost as anything less than the necessary price for entry: she complained of extra expenses tacked on by ISPs such as "Compu$erve," and suggests the "freenet," a movement to offer free access through universities, might be an accessible alternative (1994).

Access to wider social support was frequently highlighted as a key benefit of Internet use. Authors included extended listings of trans-specific BBSes and Usenet groups, discussing their general merits, access options, and drawbacks. By 1994, many of the BBSes initially listed in *TS-TV Tapestry* were defunct, but many more had been founded in their place. At least three

BBS services with varying degrees of wider net access had emerged, Feminet, Puss N Boots, and Cross Connection (also a regular advertiser in *Cross-Talk*). These services offered e-mail access, collected postings from both select BBSes, Usenet newsgroups, and mailing lists, and hosted archives of LGBT community publications, informational files on transgender issues, and GIFs. While some of the BBSes the services connected to were locally oriented, users were increasingly interested in national "net groups" like Usenet. Following Cross Connection's addition of these groups, "users virtually abandoned the local forums" (Richards 1994, 38).

Only a year after her comments on the "paradigm shift" of the Internet, Roberts comments in a "Hot Buzz" column on the online trans community's growth, as the "transgender community continues to evolve on the World Wide Web at a steadily increasing rate. More and more, the Web and the Internet are being used as a first-line of communication" (Roberts 1995, 12). Cross Connection's advertisements in Cross-Talk (below) reflect this shift in their rhetoric.





Figures 1.1 and 1.2: The shift in rhetoric regarding transgender community online is apparent in the two advertisements for the Cross Connection BBS service. The first ad (top) appears in the June 1994 issue of *Cross-Talk*, while the second (bottom) appears in a January 1995 issue.

The first ad (Figure 1.1) attempts to attract the technically savvy reader, whose tools (computer, modem) are the necessary gateway to what Cross Connection offers, which are both community-oriented (Tri-Ess, the oldest cross-dressers' organization in the US) and fairly technical (shareware libraries and a technical forum). The second ad (Figure 1.2) has shifted radically, focused on the user who may not be technically savvy but still wishes to connect with her trans "sisters" as part of the "cybergender movement." Like the articles that accompanied it, the ad has adopted the dominant analogies of the time, presenting their service as an off-shoot serving a specific market, the "gender community." The technical terminology of the first ad ("Usenet," "virus detection software," "GIF files") has been replaced by an emphasis on the social benefits of discussion and "roundtables." The earlier emphasis on the format of the "GIF" file has been replaced by a qualitative description of its content, part of an adult "picture library." Lastly, their new tagline, "We would all be just the same if there were no crossings," suggests a

core similarity that may be shared amongst subscribers. The "we" can be in communion with other, a state beyond differences in pursuit of a common goal—the essence of sense of community.

1.5: Finding Community Online

By 1998, trans activist and academic Stephen Whittle declared in his essay "The Trans-Cyberian Mail Way," that "what happens on the street—happens on the Net—happens on the street…the Net could have been said to become the street on which the transgender community lives" (405). Users' virtual selves, once freed to be represented online, could more easily transform in their "actual," correctly gendered selves. These freed selves also, according to Whittle, powered trans activist actions such as the Transexual Menace vigil following Brandon Teena's murder, which was primarily organized online. Online support groups and information sources flourished with the introduction of the home page and the rise of America Online (AOL), which for many years hosted one of the largest trans-specific forums, the Transgender Community Forum (often shortened to TCF). For Whittle, "the *communion* of the transgender community has been realized within the space outside of space" (1998, 405; emphasis mine). In Whittle's argument, one can see the echoes of Frazer's "productive, augmentative sharing" (1999, 83) and Rheingold's emphasis on the "webs of feeling" that connect individuals online. For Whittle and other trans authors, it was the affective aspects of online "community" which gave it such import. Currently, trans content is now easily accessible on major social media platforms, websites, and, increasingly, major media outlets. For many trans individuals, the "everyday experiences" of building identity and community now happen primarily online. This is particularly true for contemporary transgender youth, who are primarily communicating and

connecting online, a distinct change from prior generations' reliance on offline support and meetup groups (Beemyn and Rankin 2011).

However, as it did for Rheingold's "virtual community," the emphasis on the affective that underlies the "paradigm shift" obscured the labor required to maintain it. This labor, from the volunteer labor that kept bulletin board services running in the 1980s and 1990s to free labor of composing and collecting key information on trans resources, went and often still goes largely unremarked. In a telling moment, Jennifer Wells, the sysop of Genderline, in 1990 submits a letter to *Tapestry* pointing out the issues plaguing trans resources online: over-reliance on unpaid labor, limited access to resources, or the charging of prohibitively expensive fees to gain access. She calls for IFGE and readers in "our community" to "unite [their] resources to provide an informational focus for clubs, researchers, educators, and individuals" by developing "an international computerized gender data base and bulletin board or networking system" (Wells 1990, 17). Her call, as far as the archives record, goes unheeded.

As the internet was becoming the "street" where the trans community met, other sites were beginning to decline in prominence. The number of national transgender organizations being founded peaked in the mid-1990s, and foundings declined by two-thirds in following years (Nownes 2010, 700). There are hints of this decline in movement publications as well. In the October 1994 issue of *RNV*, Roberts writes of "a curious thing" she found on the newsgroups: "most of the postings in the transgender newsgroups made no mention of the organized community we all know and love out here (as opposed to 'in there.')" (1994,12). The internet could offer trans individuals a site of support and sharing 'in there,' separate from more traditional organizations and publications 'out here,' and more and more individuals were, to continue Roberts' spatial metaphor, choosing to stay in rather than go out. Yet the ideal of

community remains at the heart of trans discourse online and this project. Trans movement discourse of the 1990s and today often make appeals to "the community" or "our community," as a motivator to action (to organize the community) or an invocation of sentiment (to feel connected to the community). Contemporary popular representations of trans discourse online continue to use the same elements as articles in trans publications in the 1990s, emphasizing how users can "build a community" that empowers them (Salon.com), the ways representation online builds community (MTV.com), or how a platform is "perfect for the trans community" (McBee 2013). In these narratives and others, the use of community in relation to online spaces appears to offer the possibility that "the romanticized *ideal* [of community] has become *real*, or at least realizable" (Creed 2006b, 46).

This sentiment is reflected in not only contemporary popular discourse, but trans counterpublic discourse as well. User discussions on 1990s-era platforms, such as Usenet or websites, reflect both popular attitudes toward the internet and ongoing discussions in the developing transgender social movement. Participants were interested in finding a way to unite and connect together constituencies into a broad "transgender community," and the new "electronic frontier" of the internet offered the possibility to establish a community unbounded by geographic or national limitations. The community that emerges, however, largely reproduces the same constituencies that were most politically active: middle to upper middle class, well-educated white individuals with the skills and financial capital necessary to regularly access and use internet platforms. Lack of technical skill presents less of a barrier during the era of the homepage, as services provided tools to help with the more technical design aspects. However, the websites which still remain from this period are created and maintained by those with access to the technical and/or economic resources necessary to keep their sites up.

1.6: Beyond the Ideal: Reconstituting Community

As I have said and shown throughout this chapter, community as ideal implies the existence of community as category. Throughout all of these examples, the implied community as category takes on the "subject" position, not unlike "the state" or the "nation." Community as subject gives it a stability that can take on mythic qualities and an immanent identity to be put to work (Norris 2012, 144). The community is "never simply an accomplished fact that could in principle be recorded in a census, but is rather a precarious achievement of collective self-assertion in the face of contingent circumstances and individual proclivities. Community identity is thus manifest in what the group *does*, in its *work*" (2012, 145; italics from author). The immanent identity, in this case, is the affective desire for sense of community, which then motivates members into doing the work.

The risk of such a static notion of community, to philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, is how it transforms politics into a constant effort to call forth and make real this community identity, and puts members to work realizing this immanent community. However, this work of realization becomes a drive toward purity. In some cases, this is a purity of the body politic; for trans communities online, as well as other online 'communities' if they conceive of themselves as such, it is a purity of space: so, working toward making a 'pure' social space online where sense of community is a permanent feature. In such a broad-based community as the "transgender community" online, this purity drive is embedded in terminology and identity category, as participants debate inclusion, representation, and meaning. What users define as a "pure" social space varies across constituencies, as these case studies highlight, but the desire for purity is consistent. This is not to suggest that all members' social interactions online are oriented toward the goal of purity—in aggregate, most users post and talk with a variety of different motivations.

However, when the question of community is raised, instead of merely being implied or assumed, users often take up this work.

The work of purity, then, is the risk of community as monolith. Both Frazer and Nancy recognize this risk, and both suggest community be approached with an emphasis, in Frazer's words, on its "euphoric and fleeting" nature (1999, 83). For Nancy, community is "a matter of something quite different, namely of existence inasmuch as it is *in* common, but without letting itself be absorbed into a common substance (1991, xxxviii). Nancy's concept of "being singular plural" elaborates on this being in common. Each individual has a singular existence, yet they are not isolated but have many coterminous, plural points through their interactions. As Michelle Willson puts it, individuals come into "being with" each other "in the relations or exposures that both touch but are also distinct and resistant: incompletely shared and thus partly and mutually constitutive; singular but also plural." (2012, 286). Such "being with" is built on a foundation of radical relations, where both parties approach on an equal ground of difference, for as Andrew Norris puts it, "what we have in common is precisely not a shared identity, but rather the 'fact' that we are different from one another" (2012,147). What sense of community individuals develop is relational, built out of their shared meaning-making in the moment. This community shifts its substance in different moments, and exists prior to political and institutional structures. Jose Muñoz locates this experience in the fragmentary nature of punk music and punk fandom, which refuses ordinary myths in favor of a "imagining a commons that is held together by nothing more than a safety pin" (2013, 105). Willson uses the example of a tweet, "a singular and hence unique…event or exposure" where in a user may be "more receptive or constitutive of community...an opening or touching of beings" (Willson 2012, 287). This feeling, opening, may then be used as the grounds for political organizing, but that community is not an enduring

institution, but the perceived, increased likelihood of having a shared relationship encounter with a co-participant.

1.6.1: Defining Community Online

Technology also has a role to play in this community making. In her analysis of being-together online, Willson contrasts Nancy's theories of sociality and community, as applied to online communication, to Sherry Turkle's work on technology use. In Willson's reading, Turkle's approach is "deterministic," reducing interactions to existing on a "more-or-less" register where technology is either a help or hindrance (2012). Nancy, as Willson and James both interpret him, understands technology as not just tool, but as a shaping force in singular beings' engagement with each other and their experience of the world (2006, 145; 2012, 290). However, Willson notes that Nancy's differentiation between literature and communication—where literature does a work in connecting individuals that communication does not—does not leave room to account for phatic communication and a user's experience of technology in the moment (2012, 292).

And that experience, as this project will illustrate, is deeply important. The designed platform is neither merely tool nor frame, but a singular agent in its own right. As an agent, the platform can react to user actions—limiting user access to certain modes of interaction, forcing certain users to interact, altering itself based on users' interaction with it, or contradicting arguments made in user discourse. I understand these moments as, following feminist philosopher Susan Hekman, as disclosures. The disclosure "describes the relationship between the material, the discursive, the technological, and the practices they constitute," seeing them as an interweaving "mangle" whose "intra-actions" produces the shared social reality experienced by both platform and user (2010, 127). Disclosure presupposes the world is "not fixed", but a "product of agents' interaction in a shared environment with a world that emerges through that

interaction" (2010, 91). As Hekman argues, under a disclosure framework, individuals do not have to accept all perspectives are valid, but instead may base their arguments around the differing material consequences of users' disclosures (2010, 93). In my analysis, I bring this question of material consequences to bear through my own comparison of user disclosures, as they are shaped through intra-actions with the platform, and how these disclosures restrict or open up other discursive participants' possible choices.

I define community, then, as this encounter between different agents, both individual and technological, where their singularities meet in moments of being with and a shared experience of reality is disclosed to participants. While the discourse would posit the objective existence of a "transgender community," I understand it as the affective results of moments of disclosure where users' understandings of "transgender," "community," and "transgender community," intra-act with each other and the platform to shape how the shared reality is understood (2010, 92). In other words, the interaction and its' sometimes "productive, argumentative sharing," is the moment of community. Community dissipates once the interaction has ended. Its trace is recorded though posts, comments, or likes, but these represent a record of the encounter that adds to the counterpublic discourse, not an enduring site of continued community. Each post or tweet, the act of producing counterpublic discourse through communication, is a disclosure, where the poster's interpretation of the world meets with others' and the platform affordances and constrains. Sense of community, then, arises from disclosures where users' understandings of the world are not in conflict. In this disclosure, users sense their view of the world is sync, and they experience a moment of relational communion. Users who sense their perspectives are out of sync fail to experience sense of community, and may argue against community based on its material consequences for themselves or others. These differing moments of communion or

conflict, then, serve as the backbone of my case studies. Discourse is spurred, in part, by a desire for moments of community, either sought out or offered for others to encounter. As the next chapter illustrates, naming and terminology shape a shared reality for participants where trans individuals are not marked as other, but one half of an acceptable binary between transgender and cisgender.

Chapter 2: Politics and "Petty Useless Bickering:" Transgender Usenet and the Emergence of "Cisgender"

2.0: Introduction

I began identifying as transgender in 2007 while an undergraduate at University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa. Due to a variety of factors, including student finances and regional cultural climate, I didn't know any other transgender individuals in my age bracket in my daily life. Instead, I learned how to be trans—for lack of a better way to put it—from the internet. Reading others' blog posts helped me learn a whole slew of new, unfamiliar practices and vocabulary, including a brand new term: "cisgender." As I learned, and later repeated many times, the term came from the Latin-derived prefix *cis*-, meaning "on this side," and signalled that one was comfortable with their birth-assigned gender.

Curious about the term's origins, I scoured the internet, and encountered a set of narratives, oft repeated and frequently cited to Wikipedia. According to the Wikipedia entry in 2007, the term's earliest appearance either came in a 1994 post to the Usenet newsgroup alt.transgendered by Dana Leland Defosse, or when Carl Buijs, a Dutch transman, coined "cisgender" in 1995. However, neither narrative adequately explained how the term went from Usenet—a platform I had never heard of before reading this page—to attaining its rapidly growing omnipresence in transgender and public discourse. Through this encounter and innumerable subsequent ones, I remained fascinated by this gap. What happened during these intervening years that allowed "cisgender" to spread so widely?

This chapter, inspired by this question, investigates public narratives of cisgender's origin and its early use, but this investigation does not aim to recover a definitive origin point or exact timeline of transmission. Instead, this chapter is both a discursive and a genealogical analysis,

which uses the "field of entangled and confused parchments" to develop a history of effects (Foucault 1991 [1971]: 76) for cisgender. In this case, I consider how the social infrastructure and affordances of Usenet, specifically around the posting and circulation of content, allowed specific understandings of the term "cisgender" to gain visibility. Though the term's current ubiquity would suggest a trajectory of increasing adoption, for many years only a small subset of Usenet posters actively used the term. However, these posters possessed a particular set of qualities, such as frequent posting and a propensity for confrontation, that made their posts more likely to not only draw an audience but also a variety of responses—which would quote some or all of the earlier messages. Though many definitions now position "cisgender" as a value-neutral adjective, I argue the term's contemporary adoption can be attributed to the political and ideological meaning with which these early Usenet posters imbued it. Most importantly, these users applied a specific interpretation of "cisgender" which prioritized gender performance over embodiment as the primary site of difference between trans and non-trans individuals. This move circumvented existing hierarchies within trans spaces that prioritized gender normative presentation and one's ability to "pass," focusing instead on the oppressive nature of wider social norms. These posters used cisgender to construct an 'us/them' dynamic that emphasized members' shared oppression, which would serve as a basis for their organizing efforts.

2.1: Defining Not-Transgender

However, "cisgender" wasn't the first term to be used by transgender individuals to differentiate between themselves and others. Before it emerged as the preferred term, trans individuals often used either 'natal' (i.e. natal female and natal male); trans women also used "Genetic Girl," "Genuine Girl," or "genny"—both terms often shortened to "GG"—to differentiate between trans and non-trans women. Both of these terms emphasized sex assigned

at birth, and functionally signaled an irreconcilable core difference between trans people and non-trans people.[7] Ann Bolin, in her 1988 book *In Search of Eve*, includes a particularly vivid description of how she interpreted transsexual women's attitudes toward GGs:

> Genetic women are regarded as having the mana of a lifetime of experience as women and consequently are highly valued as cohorts in the passing process. Having a GG who was either a roommate or a friend who spent a lot of time with the transsexual is regarded as a special source of passing insight on two counts. First, she can act as a direct tutor, sharing that history of special 'for women only' information. Secondly, there is almost an aura of contagious magic about her. It is as if her femininity or femaleness rubs off on her transsexual friend by her physical proximity, sharing and doing things together. She also acts as a real life role model in many respects. Genetic women are given a special status in transsexuals' initial passing experiences or 'rites of the first time.' (1998: 139)

While Bolin's non-transgender perspective may color her analysis, this quote offers a stark contrast to most modern definitions of "cisgender." In contrast to the more neutral "cisgender," this term puts the emphasis on genetics, suggesting the non-transgender woman's genetic makeup allowed her access to a variety of specifically gendered knowledge inaccessible to trans women. For the GG, femininity is an innate quality arising from her genes, one that gives her a mystical quality the trans woman can only hope to successfully imitate. The GG embodies the gender norms the trans woman aims to first imitate then take on fully as her own. However, the trans woman will always be marked as an "other" woman, unable to match the GG's genetic purity. For those who used cisgender, GG and other similar terms' emphasis on normative gender presentation was one of their key failings.

As I noted in my introduction, there is no definitive etymological narrative as to when and how cisgender emerged. For most of the term's history, Wikipedia has functionally served as

[7] In an interesting twist, the current definition for "genetic girl" in the Wikitionary, Wikipedia's open source dictionary, simply defines the term as LGBT slang for "a ciswoman," discursive and literally linking the concept back to cisgender.

the de-facto authority on its use and etymological origins. Wikipedia currently cites German sexologist Volkmar Sigusch, as a possible originator: he first used the neologism *cissexual* in his 1991 article "Die Transsexuellen und unser nosomorpher Blick" ("Transsexuals and our nosomorphic view") (Sigusch 1998).[8] The Usenet origin narrative appears in the first substantial edit made to the page by Wikipedia user NextPaige in 2003. NextPaige adds information about Carl Buijs's 1996 post in Usenet newsgroup soc.support.transgendered claiming he created the term, while Defosse's 1994 post is added to the page in 2006. Following the publication of Julia Serano's 2007 book *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, Serano is credited in the Wikipedia page with increasing the terms' popularity amongst activists. For the next eleven years after NextPaige's first edit, users would go back and forth about the validity of cisgender's connections to Usenet, until both mentions were finally removed in 2014 due to a lack of citations to reliable secondary sources.[9] Despite Wikipedia users' concerns, "authoritative" sources continue to make connections to Usenet: when the Oxford English Dictionary added "cisgender" and associated terms in 2015, its earliest cited use cases come from Usenet newsgroups (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

However, none of these sources offer much insight into what made cisgender so appealing or how it gained such wide adoption prior to the mid-2000s. Each of the term's cited creators offer differing interpretations of what they intended the term to mean. In the 1996 post cited on Wikipedia, Buijs says he "just made [cisgender] up. I just kept running into the problem of what to call non-T*people in various discussions, and one day it just hit me: non-trans = cis.

[8] There is also anecdotal evidence from German trans individuals who transitioned in the 1980s, mentioned both on Usenet and in the comments on Julia Serano's blog posts on the subject, that use of trans and cis as binary opposites was common in support groups during that time period.

[9] In example, when another user prefixed the term "probably" before "created," NextPaige promptly removed the edit, commenting that "Buijis definately coined the term" (spelling their own).

Therefore, cisgendered." A user claiming to be Defosse posted to the "cisgender" Wikipedia page's Talk page in 2006, and elaborated on her intended meaning, citing her background as a biologist: "I simply used the prefix cis as the complement to that of trans. In the simplest interpretation, cis means on the same side and trans means across. Cis and trans are not just where something is, however; they extend to the realms of their respective effects."[10] Outside of Usenet, though, the term is absent from print archives (retrieved from the Digital Transgender Archive) of transgender publications, such as magazines, brochures, conference proceedings, or newsletters. Moreover, few transgender-specific websites from the time period adopted it. Andrea James's TS-Roadmap, one of the most prominent transgender resources online, defines (and as of this writing, continues to identify) "cisgendered" in 2001 as "a rarely-used term," (James 2001), while a glossary she recommends notes that "cisgendered" "has become trendy in the late 1990's" (Annie 1999).[11] Only one site, maintained by active Usenet poster Donna Lynn Matthews, cites the term without qualification or comment in its glossary and positions Buijs as its creator (Matthews 1999). For those who supported using the term, Matthews's glossary was an authoritative source. The Wikipedia page cites Matthews glossary from 2006 up until all mentions of Usenet are scrubbed in 2014. Julia Serano, most frequently positioned as the term's contemporary popularizer with her 2007 book *Whipping Girl*, cites Emi Koyama's 2002 post to the Women's Studies Listserv (WMST-L), archived on Koyama's website, as her inspiration to adopt the term (Serano 2011). Koyama, in turn, cites Matthews's definition as authoritative

[10] An unregistered user claims below Defosse's comment to have coined "cisgendered" in 1994 as a term "to describe those who move from one mode of masculinity or femininity to another," which they later used in publicity materials for GLQSOC-L, the Gay, Lesbian, Queer Social Science listserv. While it is difficult to determine the validity of this claim, the term is used amongst a list of other deviant categories on the listserv's landing page, which was last updated in 1999. Its contextual placement, then, implied a very different meaning from its current one.

[11] This dismissive attitude could be partially attributed to James's low overall opinion of Usenet, of which she declared that "anyone posting there should be considered unreliable and unstable, and possibly dangerous. These are support group rejects who have proven they are unable to play nice with others" (James 2017).

regarding the term's origin (2002). In all of these cases, Usenet remains a prominent force in the etymological narrative. In order to understand why Usenet proved such a fertile ground for the development of "cisgender," we need to better understand its underlying architecture, technological affordances, and user culture.

2.2: Usenet: "A herd of performing elephants with diarrhea"

Usenet, first established in 1980, is a distributed discussion system built on a decentralized network of servers ferrying user messages to subscribers across the network. Unlike most modern social media platforms, Usenet lacks both dedicated central servers and a dedicated administrative team overseeing its maintenance. Instead, its core architecture is distributed across a large, constantly shifting collection of servers, making it nearly impossible for governments to successfully regulate—thus why it's now best known as a haven for illegal file-sharing. In format, Usenet messages themselves largely mirror email, with designated headers containing pre-set information, including a unique Message-ID, and message content below. Posts made in response to another post included that post's Message-ID in its "References" header, which a Usenet newsreader would use to create a message "thread" to follow.

All messages were required to designate at least one newsgroup that would receive their message. Though their name implies a static structure, newsgroups are little more than loose collections of topic-specific messages users would subscribe to, receiving a new load of posts each time they logged in. Following the "Great Renaming" of newsgroups in 1987 by the Backbone Cabal, a group of news admins who oversaw some of the network's key servers, Usenet was organized into first seven, then eight "official" hierarchies, known as the Big 8: comp.*, misc.*, news.*, rec.*, sci.*, soc.*, humanities.* and talk.* (Pfaffenberger 2003).

Newsgroup names are organized in order of increasing specificity of topic; in example, humanities.music.composers.wagner focuses on academic discussion of the music of a specific composer, Wagner. The alt.* hierarchy was created after the Great Renaming as an alternative hierarchy, with fewer rules and restrictions around newsgroup creation.[12] As early news admin Eric Ziegast humorously put it, "ALT stands for 'Anarchists, Lunatics, and Terrorists'." (Barr 1995)

Unlike discussion sites we're familiar with today, newsgroups did not have membership or signup requirements. Instead, one's Usenet 'identity', so to speak, was tied to one's email address—which could be anonymized or spoofed. Users also used distinct signatures to differentiate their posts or link to their social presence on other platforms. Highly active posters often became known, familiar presences within a newsgroup (Baym 2000), and their familiarity made their posts more likely to draw a response (Whittaker, et al, 2003). Cross-posting, or posting a message to a variety of (possibly-unrelated) newsgroups, allowed messages to appear simultaneously in a variety of different discussion "spaces." While cross-posting increased the level of interactivity in Usenet, often bringing in new perspectives, it also went against the rules of Usenet "netiquette" and lead to some of the first instances of spam (Whittaker, et al, 2003; Brunton 2013). In the fast and furious environment of Usenet, keeping track of ongoing discussions across multiple messages and newsgroups could still prove difficult, and posters relied heavily on quoting prior messages to track the flow of conversation.

Though Usenet had been popular on college campuses for many years, it rose in popularity amongst the wider public in the early to mid-1990s when Usenet-specific newsreaders

[12] Unsurprisingly, the alt.* hierarchy was frequently prone to spin-off or joke newsgroups, such as "alt.swedish.chef.bork.bork.bork" (Barr 1995).

and America Online made accessing the network much easier (Pfaffenberger 2003). As the network grew, Usenet's membership was dominated by a vast "invisible crowd" of readers who consumed content produced by a small but highly active core membership (Smith 1999). According to one study, 27% of newsgroup messages came from "singleton posters," or posters who contributed only once to a given newsgroup, while an average 25% of all newsgroup posts were made by a "tiny percentage" (2.9%) of the larger newsgroup poster population (Whittaker, et al, 2003: 84).

Usenet's social and political culture, in many ways, mirrored its architecture: a loose confederation of principles centered on keeping the anarchic platform afloat. Collected institutional knowledge was shared and passed down through meta-discourse on the purpose and direction of Usenet (Pfaffenberger 2003). Debates about platform structure and organization emphasized solutions based in pseudo-democratic processes focused on "punish[ing] only those actions that threaten the network's ability to function as a forum for deliberative debate" (2003, 21). At the newsgroup level, users' activity was loosely governed by a variety of informal rules and documentation like newsgroup charters and FAQs, which set down the rules of group "netiquette" and helped foster a collective group identity (Burnett and Bonnici 2003). In some communities, mentor-mentee structures solidified institutional knowledge, as mentors enculturated "newbies" in both the technical skills and social norms to successfully navigate Usenet (Baym 2000). While group flame wars around unofficial group "rules" did occur, these debates sometimes had the side effect of re-emphasizing and preserving established social norms (Baym 2000, 187).

However, violators were equally as likely to find their inbox flooded with furious flames from other posters. Usenet posters' propensity for vituperative debate, including flaming, is

reflective of the platform's wider reputation of anarchism, insularity, and prodigious production of content. In 1992, Gene Spafford—early Usenet sysadmin, maintainer of the "official" newsgroup list, and member of the "Backbone Cabal" that partially oversaw Usenet's maintenance—compared Usenet to "a herd of performing elephants with diarrhea—massive, difficult to redirect, awe-inspiring, entertaining, and a source of mind-boggling amounts of excrement when you least expect it" (Spafford 2017). In his study of flaming on Usenet, Kayany defines flames as messages that contain both hostility and lack of restraint, often marked by "swearing, calling names, ridiculing, and hurling insults towards another person, his/her character, religion, race, intelligence, and physical or mental ability" (1998, 1138). Posters' response to being flamed varied, from denunciation, avoidant strategies like withdrawal or apology, to defusing the tension through jokes (Lee 2005). Over time, flaming can become an accepted social norm in a given newsgroup, and flame wars end "only when both parties become bored with them" (2005, 399). Long running and recurrent flame wars, particularly around technical issues, could take on the status of "holy wars," defined in Eric Raymond's *Jargon File* as ongoing arguments where "most of the participants spend their time trying to pass off personal value choices and cultural attachments as objective technical evaluations" (Raymond 2004).

Though newsgroup moderation was possible, only 12% of all newsgroups were moderated (Whittaker, et al. 2003, 81). Moderating a newsgroup could be significant time investment, as it required a dedicated individual or set of individuals to approve all items that would be posted to the group. Though moderators could limit the amount of "excrement" produced, Whittaker, et al. found that instead of promoting more productive, on-topic conversation, their presence had no effect on the overall level of interactivity in a newsgroup.

Instead, interactivity and social restrictions existed in an inverse relationship: the fewer social or technical restrictions there were to posting, the more interactive a newsgroup would be (2003).

2.3: Methodology: From Macro to Micro and Back Again

All this "excrement," so to speak, means doing research on Usenet can be particularly challenging. Currently, few publicly accessible, searchable Usenet archives exist. Usenet posts were not archived and made available on a mass scale until DejaNews started collecting them in 1995, and this archive is by no means complete. Following DejaNews's announcement, users concerned about privacy successfully advocated for DejaNews to adopt the the "X-No-Archive" header, allowing posters to XNAY (for X-No-Archive: yes) their posts. Google acquired the the commercial DejaNews archive in 2001 and integrated the data, along with several other donated collections of pre-1995 material, into its existing Google Groups format (Google 2001). Nevertheless, the XNAY header has made achieving a fully "complete" archive impossible. Moreover, later changes to the Groups format—particularly the removal of date-limiting search operators—have made it difficult to use for research (Baio 2015; Braga 2015).

For this chapter, then, I've relied on collections held in the Internet Archive's Usenet Historical Collection, which were collected by scraping the Google Groups archives in 2013. Each collection, which houses between 60,000 to 100,000 messages, is stored in a plain text mailbox (.mbox) file with no internal organization. Moreover, a sizable chunk of the messages from the later half of the 2000s onward, when posts to transgender newsgroups declined significantly, are either commercial advertisements, functionally spam, for niche fetish websites or mass-mailed spam such as Mike Corley's "MI5-Persecution" posts, which chronicled Corley's

evidence in support of his belief he is the target of an ongoing conspiracy led by British intelligence agency MI5.[13]

Both of these factors made using only qualitative methodologies, in this case Critical Discourse Analysis, particularly difficult. As a result, I have also used computational analysis, in particular the programming language Python's built-in "mailbox" and "email" modules, to identify content for close discursive analysis. Given the similarities between Usenet posts and email, the "mailbox" module was key in automatically parsing message content, counting term incidence, extracting specific messages, and other functions. In example, each collection held a copy of posts cross-posted across multiple trans newsgroups, meaning the dataset could hold up to five identical copies of the same post. In order to remedy this issue, I wrote a script that built a "master" list of Message-IDs, off which I made a "master" collection of nearly 400,000 posts. This collection also served as the basis for the Transgender Usenet Archive, built using the Bookworm API. The Bookworm API, currently maintained by Erez Aiden at the Rice Cultural Observatory and Schmidt at Northeastern University, allows for lexical analysis of large-scale datasets, tracking word usage over time (Schmidt n.d.). All graphs, charts, and social networks included in this chapter come either from the Archive or scripts I wrote, some of which have been published in an associated GitHub repository (https://github.com/apdame/usenet-tools).

2.4: Transgender Newsgroups on Usenet

Transgender-themed newsgroups first emerged on Usenet in 1992 beginning with alt.transgendered. According to the alt.transgendered FAQ, the newsgroup was founded in late 1992 in reaction to the creation of an "unapproved" newsgroup, "alt.sex.trans." Concerned that

[13] Corley's spam would later inspire a short opera, "The Corley Conspiracy," performed in 2007 at the London Design Festival (http://www.thecorleyconspiracy.com/).

the group's alt.sex designation, which was commonly associated with erotica and fetish groups, meant it would not be widely distributed, two trans Usenet regulars created alt.transgendered two days later. Though a variety of trans-themes newsgroups would be founded over the next ten years, this chapter focuses on the five most active groups: alt.transgendered, soc.support.transgendered, alt.support.crossdressing, alt.fashion.crossdressing, and alt.support.srs.

Except for alt.support.srs, all of these groups were founded around 1994 and 1995, just as transgender publications were helping users get "wired." Though very little data was collected on Usenet usage, some general hints as to user demographics and newsgroup propagation across the wider Usenet network are available. Early Usenet administrator Brian Reed's semi-monthly Usenet readership survey, which tracked a variety of metrics for highly active newsgroups, included alt.transgendered from January 1993 to July 1995. From month to month, alt.transgendered averaged an estimated 21,130 readers worldwide and was received by about a little under half of all Usenet servers. As more and more transgender-related newsgroups were founded, the percentage of messages cross-posted between alt.transgendered and other newsgroups grew substantially, reaching 51% by July 1995. Poster activity in trans newsgroups mirrored Usenet at large: in the dataset, unique email addresses with over 100 posts make up a small percentage of the total posters; in contrast, over 50% of all unique email addresses make only 1 post to each group (Table 2.1).

Newsgroup	**Upper and Lower Poster Rankings**
soc.support.transgendered	Upper (over 100 posts): 211/11750 (2%) Lower (1 post): 6306/11750 (54%)
alt.transgendered	Upper (over 100 posts): 41/19775 (0.2%) Lower (1 post): 12577/19775 (63%)

alt.fashion.crossdressing	Upper (over 100 posts): 86/12428 (0.7%) Lower (1 post): 7117/12428 (57%)
alt.support.crossdressing	Upper (over 100 posts): 91/8473 (1%) Lower (1 post): 4738/8473 (56%)
alt.support.srs	Upper (over 100 posts): 216/6586 (3%) Lower (1 post): 3367/6586 (51%)

Table 2.1: Upper And Lower Post Counts per Unique Email (all percentages rounded up to the nearest whole number). Email addresses are not aggregated in instances when poster changed their primary Usenet address.

Very little recorded information about poster demographics on transgender Usenet exists. One poster did conduct an informal, voluntary survey of alt.transgendered posters at some point prior to 1997, and the results were later published in the online transgender "webzine," *The Subversive*.[14] According to their results, the average survey respondent was 32.7 years old, likely from the United States (78.9% of respondents), and lived in an "urban environment" (80.3%). Self-identifications were roughly even split between transsexual (42.1%) and transvestite (47.3%), with 5.3% identifying as "interested third party." However, respondents had few other connections to transgender media outside of alt.transgendered: a little over half (59.2%) of the survey respondents were not members of a support group other than alt.transgendered, and only 22.4% subscribed to any transgender publications (Phillips n.d.). Transgender publications were equally unlikely to discuss Usenet: outside of a few mentions, trans newsgroups are discussed directly only once in the October 1995 issue of *Renaissance News & Views*. Author Judith Storm mentioned them in a brief aside, noting that "there is very little of help in [newsgroups] - mainly they seem to be a couple of individuals scoring points off each other" (1995, 1)

[14] The inexactness of this date comes from the webzine's publishing practices: none of the "issues" are dated, so getting an exact publication date is difficult. However, the survey had been published prior to when the webzine's home page was archived by the Internet Archive for the first time in 1997, allowing me to identify an estimated date.

User behavior in trans newsgroups was loosely governed by their founding charters and FAQs, often the work of one or two individuals who then asked for (or were given unasked for) feedback from users at large. Charters functioned as the "founding document" of a newsgroup, outlining its purpose, on-topic posts, and off-topic posts, and any other appropriate or inappropriate behaviors. Trans newsgroups' FAQs were often more detailed expansions of these categories, focused on a set of key elements: A definition and historical context of the group, basic "community" definitions and information, and community-specific appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. The group definition and history in particular presented a shared context for users, a sense of the group's larger purpose. In example, the authors of the soc.support.transgendered FAQ emphasize that soc.support.transgendered was primarily for posters seeking social support while alt.transgendered was the appropriate venue for "discussions about the philosophy of crossdressing and transsexualism" (Wilson 2001). The alt.fashion.crossdressing charter, in contrast, specified that "articles posted to this newsgroup should be about fashion, cross-dressing, or about the newsgroup itself" (Matthews 1994).

However, the lack of central authority in trans newsgroups meant enforcing these rules and structures in any way outside of social condemnation, like flaming, was nearly impossible. Though several of these newsgroups actively discouraged flaming in their FAQs and/or charters, such social norms were near-impossible to enforce without an active moderation team. Instead, aggressive debate and flaming were frequent occurrences, leading to several attempts to moderate or replace existing newsgroups.[15] As one poster put in her unsuccessful proposal to establish a new trans newsgroup, alt.support.transpeople, in 2000:

[15] In fact, the level of contention was so high amongst regular posters to alt.support.srs it spurred several efforts between 1997 and 2004 to re-establish the newsgroup as a moderated group. However, because members could not agree on just who would be able to serve as an impartial moderator, these efforts ultimately failed.

> Of the TG newsgroups that exist, (not including Trans-porn groups), only one has not been overrun with petty bickering and fueds, and that one group is slowly becoming a porn group. on alt.support.srs and soc.support.transgendered especially, honest advice and support has become difficult to find, because a group of about 5 people spam the groups with constant disparaging remarks and flames, and will not cease doing so. alt.support.transpeople would hopefully be an escape from such petty useless bickering, and be the supportive environment the others used to be.

Despite this poster's concerns, the limited amount of trans related venues, rapid production of content, and non-existent self-moderation were, retrospectively, one of Usenet's greatest strengths as a trans counterpublic. For though "honest advice and support" might have come only rarely, discussions of political ideology were constant. On Usenet, the same limited number of appropriate venues meant active posters were constantly and repeatedly engaging their ideological opponents—without any moderators to slow or stop the flow of discussion. In this environment, debaters honed their rhetorical flourishes and arguments to a razor-fine point. Out of all this "petty useless bickering" would emerge one of the core underlying concepts of modern transgender activism: the category of "cisgender."

2.5: The Emergence of Cisgender

At least initially, the Usenet archive would seem to validate narratives which position Defosse as the "creator" of cisgender. She posts to alt.transgendered on May 25, 1994, requesting transgender-related resources for her research, refers to a list of "issues of interest" including "transphobia, hostility, general knowledge and understanding, attitudes of the queer community and cisgendered people, etc." Defosse offers not definition or explanation of the term in her post. However, the very next post to use the term casts doubt on the Defosse as creator narrative. Exactly five months to the day, on October 25, 1994, poster Jennileigh replies to a message from another poster worried about attending a local crossdressing support group. She

reassured them they needn't worry and, after all, “we shouldn't judge each other on appearances. That's what the cis-gendered, narrow-minded people do.” Like Defosse, Jennileigh offer no contextual explanation of what “cis-gendered” means. The next post to use “cisgender” comes two years later, in 1996—well after the Buijs creation date. Some of these inconsistencies can be attributed to the limitations and gaps found in many early Usenet archives, as noted earlier. Yet the existence of Jennileigh’s post, its unexplained hyphenation, and its specific, contextual use suggests another trajectory entirely.

For though Defosse may be cited as a possible creator, Jennileigh’s use embodies the particular contextual and ideological meanings underlying most posters’ use of “cisgender.”[16] Like its modern form, the term was most often used to differentiate between transgender and non-transgender individuals. However, who was identified as “cisgender” and “transgender” differed significantly from the modern usage. As noted in Chapter 1, transgender counterpublics online really come into their own starting in the early 1990s, as transgender activists are pushing for the broad adoption of “transgender” as an umbrella term. On Usenet, however, the identities of “transgender” and “transsexual” were still often seen as distinct categories. Those who identified as “transgender” or a “transgenderist” on Usenet didn’t identify with their birth-assigned gender and instead lived full time as the opposite gender, yet didn’t desire sex-reassignment surgery (SRS). This version of “transgender,” whose origin is often credited to well-known cross-dressing advocate Virginia Prince, was common in cross-dressing discourse at the time (Williams 2015). Since the broad adoption of the umbrella transgender category, “transgenderist” as an identity category has largely faded from use.

[16] In some cases, users used the noun “cisgenders;” simply using “cis” was fairly uncommon until the mid-to-late 2000s.

In practice, “transgender” and “transsexual” represented two different user categories within the population of trans Usenet: transsexual users, who had received or sought SRS, and transgender users, who did not desire SRS or who were ideologically opposed to SRS. However, users were also split on what the core goal of emergent trans activism should be. Some adopted a civil rights framework, focusing on legal and civil recognition, while others emphasized resisting the societal emphasis on linking sexed embodiment to gender identity. Posters’ location within these two differing binaries served as a good predictor of the likelihood they would use “cisgender.” Transsexual and transgender users who were in favor of a civil rights approach rarely used “cisgender” and preferred terms like “GG” or “natal.” Transgender users who prioritized challenging the sex-gender link preferred “cisgender,” using it to identify *anyone* whose gender presentation and sex were aligned—even transsexuals who’d had or desired SRS. So when Jennileigh speaks dismissively of those “cis-gendered, narrow-minded people,” she identifies a wide swath of individuals who share one commonality: they present their gender in ways that match their sexed embodiment.

2.5.1: Spreading the Word

As noted in my Introduction, the population of users who actively used the term “cisgender” was relatively small. Looking at their usage alone would mean only studying a fairly limited population with, in some cases, clear ideological motives that influence their rhetorical choices. An analysis of these posters’ discourse, moreover, would not adequately address how their discursive spins on the term gained visibility and were gradually adopted. Unlike a similarly active contemporary platform like Twitter, where hashtags serve as loose confederations of messages meant for an unclear audience, newsgroups bear more similarity to discussion groups. Newsgroups functioned as repositories of messages users subscribed to,

meaning they received all messages sent to a newsgroup regardless of their interest or desire in reading certain threads. Given the sheer volume of posts made to any given newsgroup, users relied heavily on quoting earlier messages, designated by a > at the beginning of each quoted line, in their responses.[17] Quoting, including quoting at length, was an essential part of Usenet discourse. Quoting allowed readers who hadn't been in the conversation to more easily jump in mid-stream, without having to read all of the earlier messages—which they might not be able to access. In this way, quotes embedded the flow of discussion within the message itself, reproducing much of the content that came before it within the post.

As a result, a term like "cisgender" could continue to appear and reappear in quotes from earlier posters, even if it wasn't adopted by other discussants. Using the quote format norm as a baseline, I was able to differentiate between posts that only use "cisgender," posts that only quote "cisgender," and posts that both use and quote "cisgender." As a result, I study not only usage but appearance, which combines usage with incidence in quotes. Appearance gives us insight into the term's overall visibility within the counterpublic, and thus the likelihood that readers would encounter the term. Below are two social network maps which track the term's overall appearance within the dataset. These networks were built by collecting select data on each message, which is designated as a node. Each node represents a post in the collection that either includes "cisgender," "cisgendered," and other variants or a post listed under the "References" header for ate aforementioned posts. Nodes are connected based on connections made via the "References" header, which lists the Message-IDs of posts this message replies to, as well as any messages that came before. Nodes in Figure 2.1 are weighted by in-degree (so,

[17] By the time my analysis begins, this format had been widely established as the standard for quoting on Usenet. (Raymond 2004)

number of posts that are responding to this post), while nodes in Figure 2.2 are weighted by out-degree (number of References the post has). Edges, or the lines connecting nodes, use the colors of their target node.

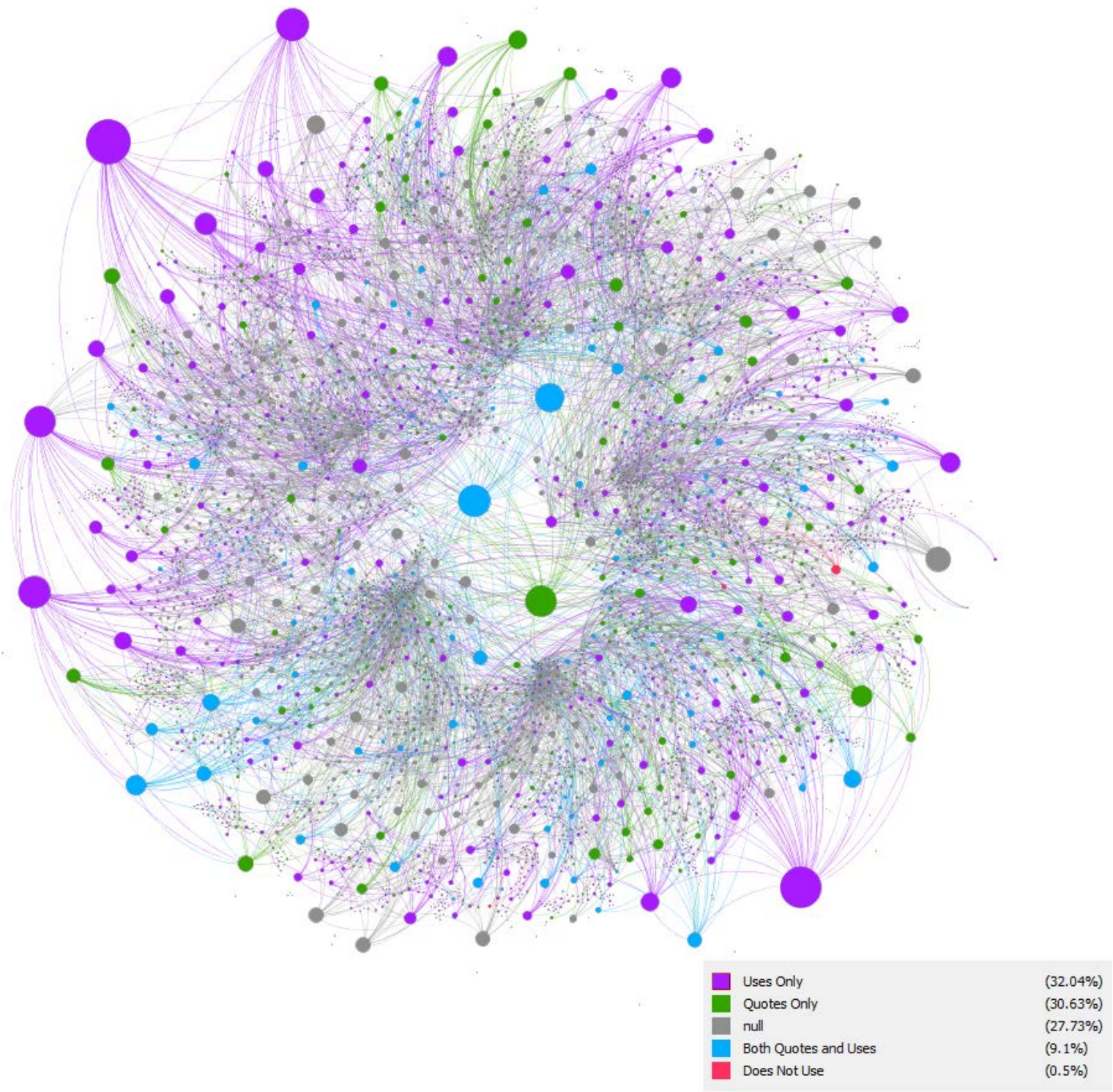


Figure 2.1: Network of posts using “cisgender” and variants. Nodes sized by in-degree of connections. “Null” nodes are posts not included in the archive.

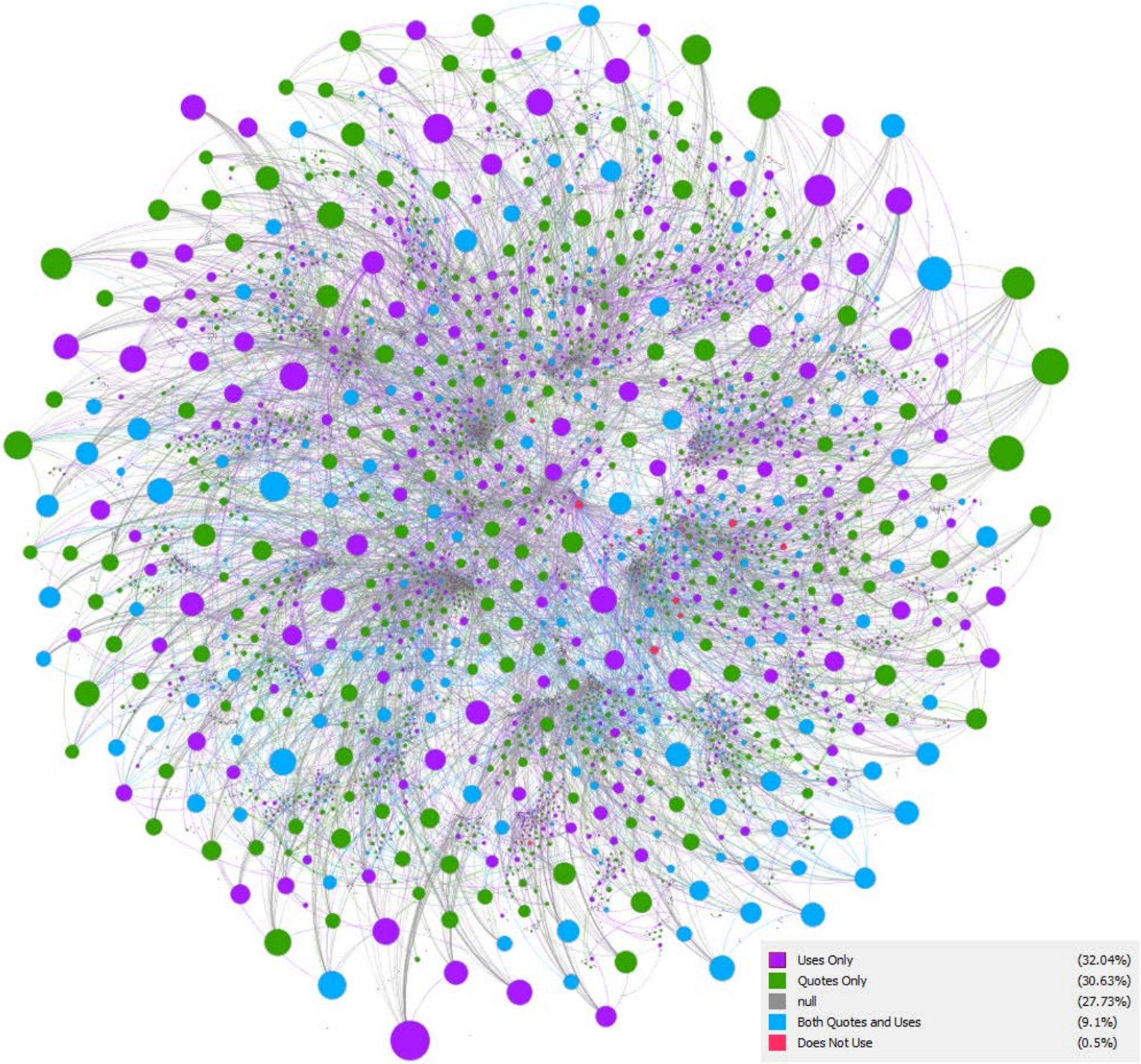


Figure 2.2: Network of posts using “cisgender” and variants. Nodes are sized by out-degree of connections. “Null” nodes are posts not included in the archive.

As these networks show, term appearance was roughly split between posts that exclusively use the term and posts that exclusively quote the term. However, posts which only

used the term were more likely to be referenced, or replied to, by other posters (Figure 2.1). In contrast, posts with more references, which came further downthread in a discussion, were more likely to only use “cisgender” in quotations, though some did mix use and quotation (Figure 2.2). Thus, prior posters’ use of the term was frequently quoted in replies—even as these posters did not adopt the term themselves.

Of the overall dataset, only a small portion of regular Usenet posters make up the vast majority of all uses of the term (Figure 2.3). Figure 2.4 narrows use down to only on those users with ten or more uses in the dataset; because users sometimes changed their emails, these addresses have aggregated under the name the poster commonly used on Usenet. The users listed in Figure 2.4 are primarily highly active users who identified as “transgender” or, in several cases, these users’ most ardent opponents. One user stands out above them all, however: Laura Blake.

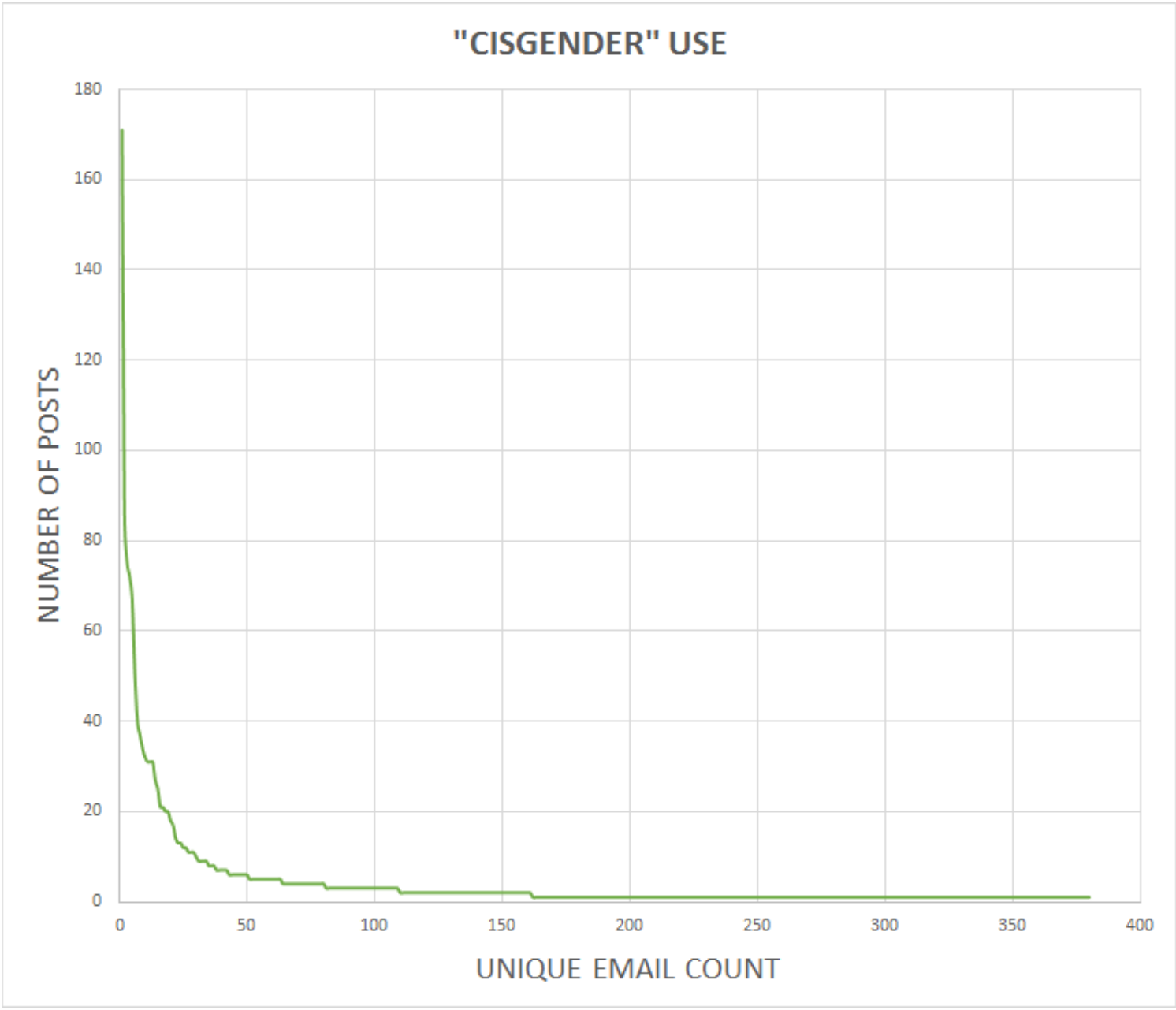


Figure 2.3: This scatter plot tracks the number of posts using “cisgender” and variants per unique email address.

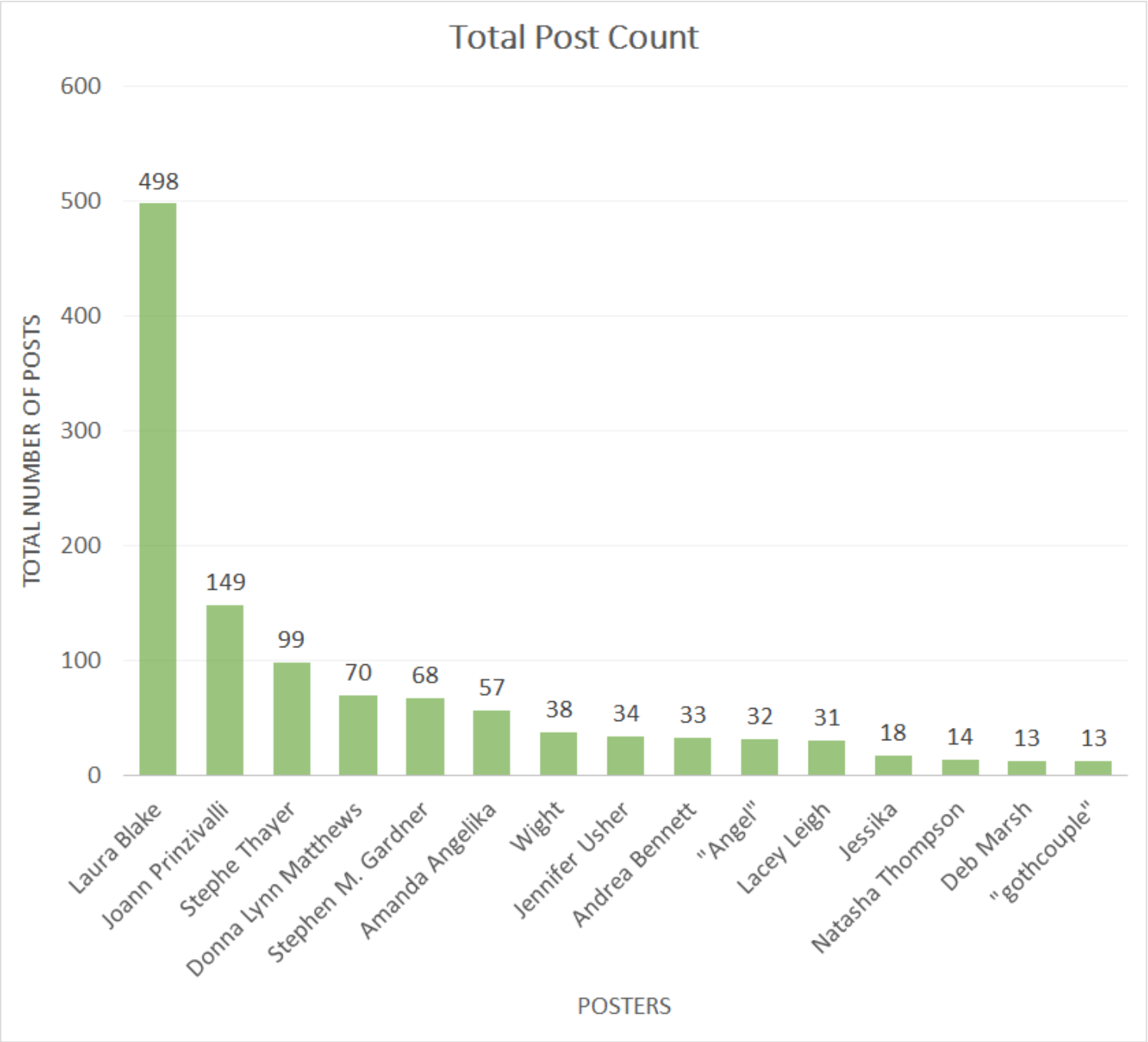


Figure 2.4: This bar chart ranks all posters who had over 10 posts in the dataset which used (not counting quoting) the term “cisgender” or “cisgendered” at least once. Laura Blake significantly outranks the next nearest poster.

2.5.2: Who Was Laura Blake?

Of all the regular posters to the transgender corner of Usenet, Blake was no doubt one of the most infamous and prolific. While Blake's presence was felt across the major trans newsgroups, she was most active post-2000 in alt.support.crossdressing, of which she claimed to be a founding member. alt.support.crossdressing was distinct from alt.transgendered and soc.support.transgendered in that poster discussions focused not on what were perceived as "transsexual" concerns, such as sex reassignment surgery, but questions around gender identity and performance. Most of Blake's long-form writing was posted to alt.support.crossdressing and occasionally its sister group, alt.fashion.crossdressing. Though Blake rarely labelled herself, she would most likely define herself as a "transgenderist," an individual who engages in "crossliving," which she vaguely defines as "the complete immersion into one of the many transgendered lifestyles" and "the complete abandonment of the cisgender lifestyle." Blake also repeatedly presented herself as the founder and head of an Ontario-based paralegal service turned Canadian transgender advocacy organization TransEqual, on whose behalf she claimed to regularly advocate with Ontario's provincial government.

As a poster, Blake was more than willing to repeatedly engage opponents in lengthy and sometimes vitriolic debate. As she once said to an opponent, "if people would stop attacking, I'd be more than happy to stop retaliating." Moreover, Blake had a propensity for targeted and aggressive insults. When challenged by an opponent to offer evidence of her trans activism compared to the Transexual Menace, a well-known trans political organization in the 1990s, she retorted: "Well, in my personal instance, I was probably at the bargaining table trying to establish workable legal recourse against most of the stuff you have suffered. Where were the rest of them? Ramming bits of cold plastic up their brand new cunts!"

Blake relied heavily on cisgender as a rhetorical tool in her arguments to identify and designate larger cultural opponents, serving as, in her words "a conversational strategy...that parallels het-homo, bringing many of our issues into a more conventionally understood 'us-them' semantic." [18] She, more than any other poster, established the "Carl Buijs as creator" narrative within counterpublic discourse on Usenet. She would repeat the Buijs origin narrative every time another user asked her to define the term; however, she consistently puts the creation year as 1995, which would later vacillate between 1995 and 1996 upon retelling by other users. She serves, in a way, as the missing link between Usenet and cisgender's popularization: Matthews credits Blake with her own self-awakening into transgender identity and hosted an archive of Blake's TransEqual-related writings on her site (Matthews n.d., Blake n.d.). Matthews' definition of cisgender, which Koyama cites as authoritative in her 2002 post, emphasizes that "one's identity and presentation *matches* their physical morphology." (Matthews 2000) The choice of "morphology," which refers to one's bodily form—alterable by SRS—instead of their birth-assigned sex is a core distinction in Blake's use of the term. Moreover, the Usenet use case cited in the Oxford English Dictionary definition of "cisgender" is a direct, if uncredited, quote from one of Blake's posts.

2.5.3: Living up to the "Cisgender Ideal"

For Blake, Buijs's invention was revolutionary, as she explained in a post in 2000:

> "Carl Buijs once made a simple comment 'How come there's no name for people who are not transgendered?' and offered us the word 'Cisgendered'... this profoundly clarified our relationship to the rest of the world and resulted in a

[18] In 2000, Blake also claimed without evidence that the term was in "*common* use in many parts of the transcommunity as well as in human rights work." She closes her comment noting that "if this is the first time you've encountered it, I can only suggest you are at least 5 years out of date." However, based on the Buijs creation narrative she regularly presents, the term would have had to rocket to popularity within months of its creation.

> change in my thinking that has allowed me to tackle many previously unfathomable problems."

Blake most clearly defines how she understands "cisgender" and "cisgendered" in her "Coming Out FAQ." Blake first composed the FAQ in 2001, revising it several times over the years; the final version, which I'll be analysing, is posted in 2006. It makes explicit the ideological dimensions of how she uses "cisgender," offering a window into the term's political applications.

Blake's choice to use an FAQ not only lends her writing a specific structure, question and answer, but a contextual meaning. As noted earlier, FAQs on Usenet were primarily introductory documents, laying out the social and discursive norms for a newsgroup. Blake's FAQ was intended to provide the recently out individual necessary frameworks for understanding their experience and the road ahead. The audience Blake targets here is crucial to the document's rhetorical impact: by offering definitions not for the existing community but those just coming out, Blake gets these individuals at the moment when they're just beginning to adopt a "transgender" worldview and build their subcultural vocabulary. By getting in at the ground floor, so to speak, Blake constructs the cisgender/transgender binary as a foundational aspect of their developing identity. In fact, the order of questions places "cisgender" right after sex, gender, and sexual orientation, the first two concepts defined, but before "transgender" or related concepts, such as "coming out" or "passing." Placement, then, is reflective of relative importance: before the reader can understand what transgender is, they must be able to recognize and understand what it *is not*.

In the FAQ, Blake's definition of cisgender is grounded in gender performance: "Cisgendered people are males who live exclusively masculine lives and females who live exclusively in the feminine lifestyles. It's about the combination of sex and gender; man-male or woman-female. This is the gender polarized and stereotypical norm of society." Blake's choice

to use “polarized” instead of binary and emphasize cisgender’s connections to “stereotypical norms” forefronts genders’ socially constructed and normative nature. Though it doesn’t state so outright, this definition implies that the “cisgendered” individual adopts a simplistic view of gender that reproduces received knowledge without question. The transgendered individual, in contrast, takes a much more complex view, in Blake’s definition of “transgender:”

> When a male prefers a feminine lifestyle or a female prefers the masculine they are said to be "Transgendered." This is about combinations of sex and gender; man-female and woman-male. It is estimated that about 1% of the world's population are transgendered. Within society, "Transgender" most often means "Not Cisgendered" in that it is a broadly based term applied to anyone who's gender and sex do not fit the "Cisgender Ideal".

Here Blake offers readers a third path beyond one’s birth-assigned gender and transsexuality, “transgenderism,” which prioritizes gender performance over embodiment. However, unlike contemporary understandings of “transgender,” Blake treats sex, “what you got between your legs,” an unchangeable fact of biology that signals membership in one of three categories: Male, Female, or Intersex. Gender identity and performance, however, are individualized, flexible categories that vary from person to person and determine one’s position in the “cisgender”/”transgender” binary.

Out of all Laura’s Blake’s voluminous writing, the “Cisgender Ideal” was, by far, the most commonly cited, quoted, and adopted of her rhetorical flourishes. It was so common, in fact, it inspired a rule in the “Laura Blake Drinking Game,” developed by a regular alt.transgendered poster: “Every time Laura says ‘cisgender’ the first person to call out ‘Ideal!’ gets her drink paid for by the person to her left.” Though Blake used the phrase frequently, often with minimal context, she specifically defines it in the FAQ:

> This is the widely held notion that everyone is Cisgendered and those who are not should be. It is [the] mistaken belief that Transgender is an invalid state --one

> created by failure or disorder-- that needs to be fixed. The Cisgender Ideal can most easily be summarized by 4 simple rules.
>
> The Cisgender Rules:
> Everyone is Cisgendered by default.
> It is wrong to be anything but Cisgendered.
> Those who are not Cisgendered must appear Cisgendered.
> Those who do not appear Cisgendered are beneath consideration.
>
> You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out how much trouble the Cisgender Ideal has caused transgendered people, over the last couple of centuries. These rules actually describe transphobia.

In this definition, Blake draws a clear us/them distinction between trans and cisgender individuals, with the Cisgender Ideal serving as a weaponized version of stereotypical gender norms. Cisgender individuals, in their presumed adoption of the "Cisgender Ideal," actively or passively undermine transgender individuals' right to exist as they are. Moreover, Blake's choice to name her concept an "ideal" over the more transparent-seeming "rules" emphasizes the impossibility of normative standards of gender. Under the "Cisgender Ideal," trying to "pass" and hide your transgender status is a sign of your false consciousness, identifying with the power of the oppressor even as they actively discriminate against you. Blake's solution, then, is to establish and respect transgender and cisgender as two equally valid self-identifications. In such a regime, non-transgender women would no longer exude "an aura of contagious magic" for the trans woman to absorb by proxy. Instead, cisgender and transgender individuals would each occupy different spots on the spectrum of sex, gender, and sexuality, and each person's lifestyle would be treated as a value-neutral aspect of their personality.

This understanding most closely reflects cisgender in its modern usage: as a value-neutral descriptor of different states of being. Similarly, the "cisgender ideal" and its rules embody a variety of practices which are still used to deny trans individuals' right to exist. Though it's difficult to know just how many users were exposed to Blake's frameworks, at least one thread

offers a window into the view of one self-identified “newbie.” In 2000, long-time lurker Toni posted her first message to alt.support.crossdressing, where she admits to her “fascination” with Blake:

> I am fascinated by Laura Blake. She is the most inspirational person I've ever read in any newsgroup. I've done a lot of thinking about the things she says. Her four rules of the cisgendered ideal make me slap my forehead and say, "darn, why didn't I think of that?"
>
> Laura, you've made me feel so much better about myself, and you've given me courage to try to be myself. I would hate to see you leave, although it does seem like you often take quite a beating--I think I can understand how you might feel. I don't for a minute, however, believe that I am the only lurker or newbie that owes you sincere thanks.

For Toni, the underlying ideas of the ideal, that she had a right to express her gender identity without fearing recrimination or violence, helped her come to terms with her desire to crossdress. Blake’s own prodigious posting habits (measured earlier in Figure 2.4) would help “cisgender,” the “cisgender ideal,” and its associated “rules” achieve a far greater reach than they might have otherwise. She would often compose lengthy, detailed responses to other posters, quoting other users quoting herself at length, and prominently featuring “cisgender ideal” and “cisgender rules.” This process, as I noted earlier, meant the term would appear and reappear with regularity. Below are two social networks that track the appearance of these terms in the dataset. Each node represents a post in the collection that either includes the terms “cisgender ideal,” “cisgendered ideal,” or cisgender rules” or was listed under the “References” header for these posts. Nodes in Figure 2.5 are weighted by in-degree (so, number of posts that are responding to this post), while nodes in Figure 2.6 are weighted by out-degree (number of References the post has). As in the previous networks, edges use the colors of their target node.

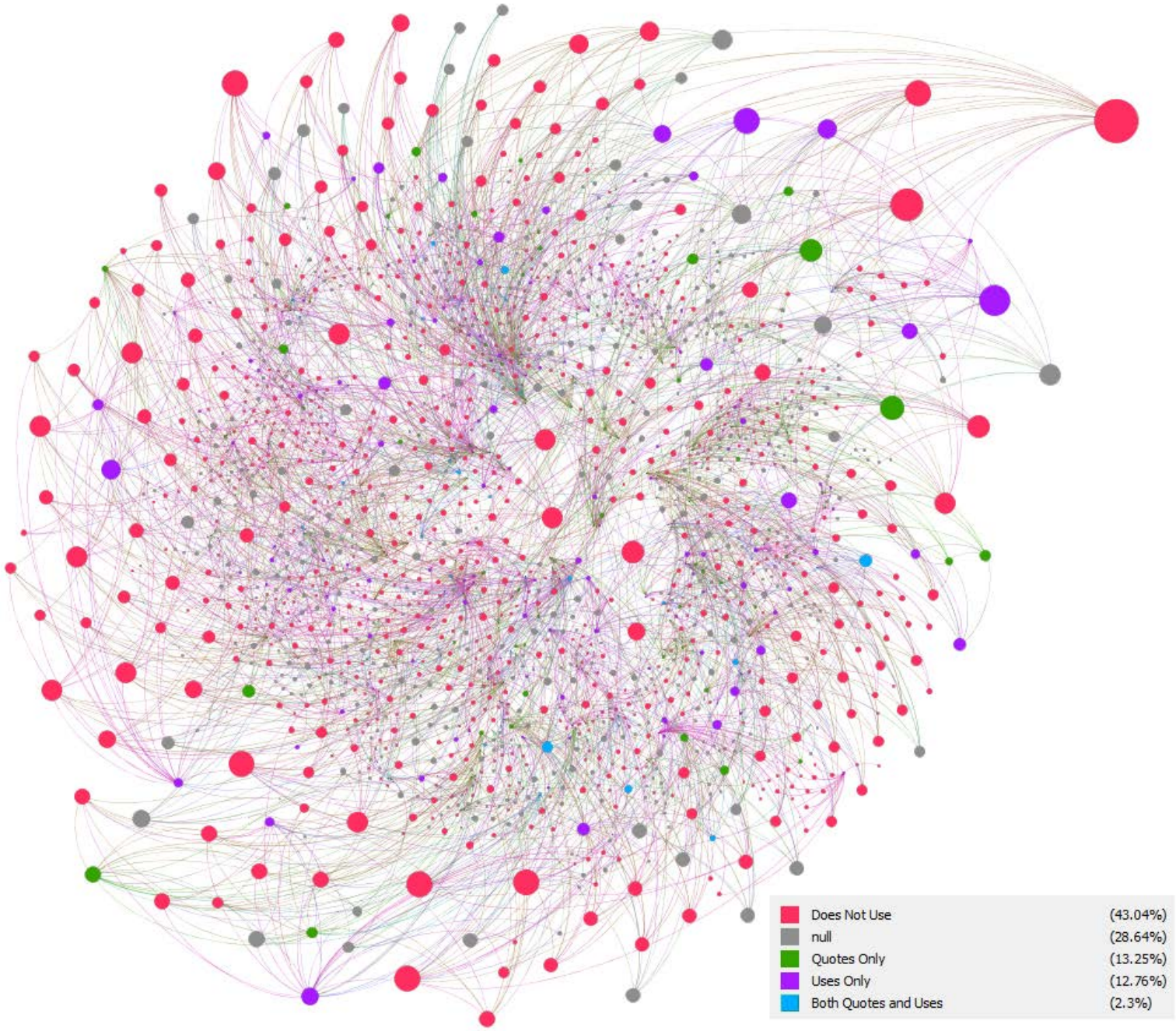


Figure 2.5: Network of posts using “cisgender ideal,” “cisgendered ideal,” and “cisgender rules.” Nodes sized by in-degree of connections. “Null” nodes are posts not included in the archive.

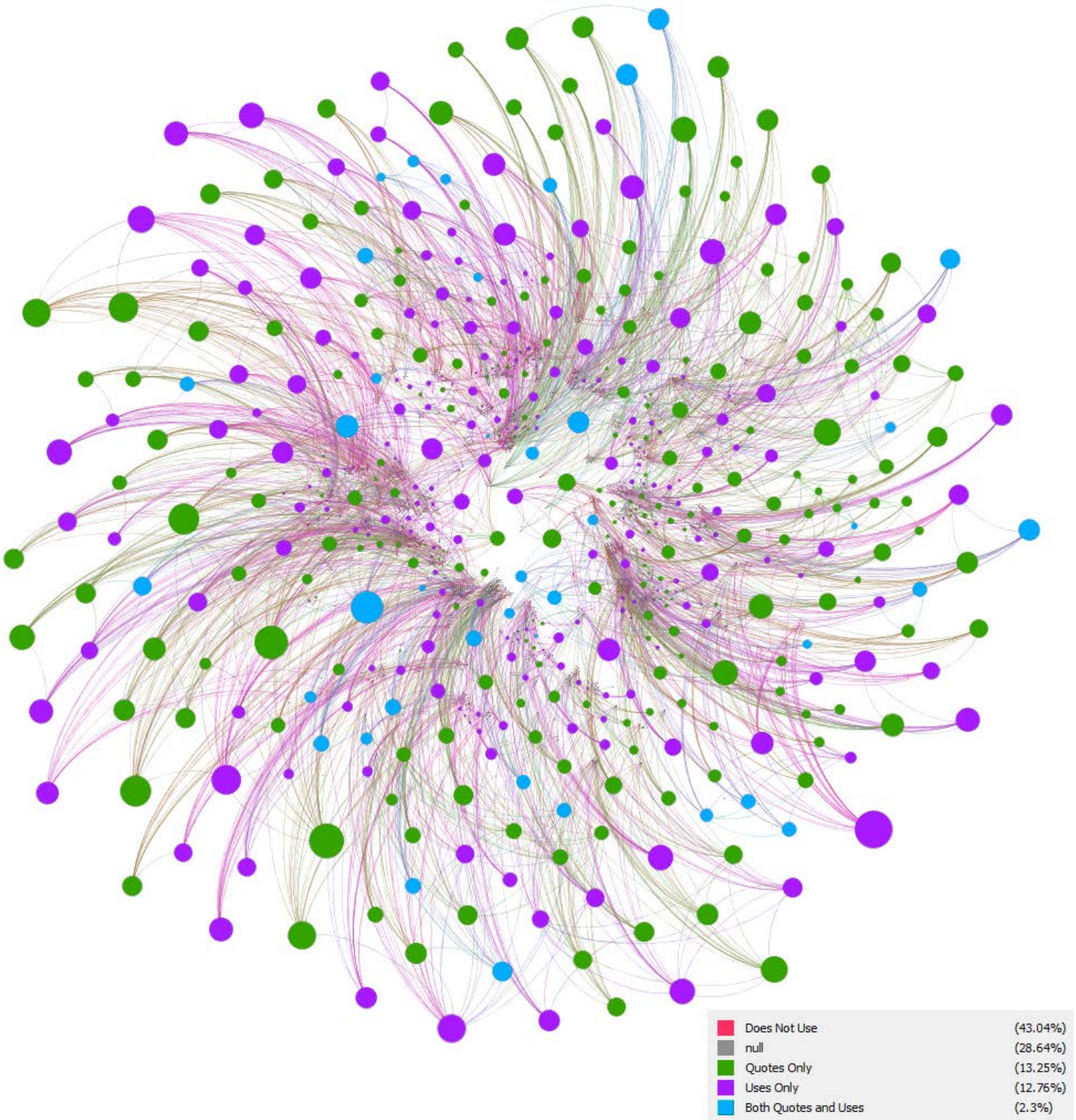


Figure 2.6: Network of posts using “cisgender ideal,” “cisgendered ideal,” and “cisgender rules.” Nodes sized by out-degree of connections. “Null” nodes are posts not included in the archive.

As Figure 2.5 illustrates, posts early on in discussions (which receive the most response) rarely use these terms. As a discussion progresses, however, the likelihood that the "cisgender ideal" or its associated "rules" will appear increases significantly. This is evident in the vast disparity in nodes between Figures 2.5 and 2.6: in 2.5, posts which use or quote these terms have significantly less presence overall, while in 2.6 the non-use nodes, despite making up over half the network, virtually disappear. Instead, 2.6 is dominated by nodes which either use or quote these terms. In most of these instances, another poster (usually Blake) would bring up the ideal as evidence of the initial poster's faulty viewpoint. This is evident in the thread "What Joann Percy has been up to," which begins with a post from regular user Joann Percy; at final count, the total thread (in the archive, at least) takes up 176 posts spread out over 17 days. The thread begins with Percy updating readers on her most recent activities with several social crossdressing organizations and includes a short paragraph describing her increasing interest in doing transgender advocacy work. She closes her post directing readers to visit her new homepage, where she discusses her most recent work. The first few responses speak complementarity of Percy's site, though the discussion takes a sharp turn when Laura Blake enters the conversation. To her, the site is "quite boring... just more of the usual plap and smargle I've come to expect from crossdressers... Same old same old." She presents Percy, representative of crossdressers as a whole, as buying into the false consciousness of cisgendered norms (spacing retained from original message):

> We *insist* that crossdressing be seen as a playful diversion because again we recognize that it offers to undo the cisgender construct in which we so ambitiously seek membership. We are so wrapped up in status-quo and inclusion that we seem to be forgetting one very central fact of our lives:
>
> WE ARE NOT CISGENDERED and we can

never be cisgendered!

By complying to existing gender and medical norms, such as the Standards of Care, transgender individuals reinforce the "the mechanism of self-oppression." In doing so "we believe the cisgendered ideal, we endorse it, and we *demand* that our peers play along with it." Instead of "seeking freedom for our peers... they are merely a form of substitute oppression, imposed upon us, this time, by our own kind. These things are the very sickness of transgendered life... Internalized transphobia." Blake closes her post telling Percy, "You are part of the problem not part of the solution. Your page should be taken down... post haste!" Once Blake's ideas enter into the conversation, Percy and other users focus the bulk of their attention on Blake's posts. The first response to Blake suggests she could find a more civil format to express her ideas, while the second poster comes out in support of Blake, calling her post "one of your better explanations of our problem...I hope people see she isn't what the problem is, the whole cisgendered ideal is the problem." Several posters continue the earlier social thread, but once another poster redirects attention to Blake's post, the thread devolves into an extended argument focused on whether or not Percy (and by extension, all those who hold a similar position) are dupes of the larger cisgendered world. By engaging Blake, Percy gives her ideas, including the "cisgender ideal," far greater visibility than they might have had otherwise, as Blake's core arguments are reiterated and quoted many times over the course of the thread.

As Toni's quote earlier alludes to and the above example illustrates, Blake was a divisive—and in some cases hated—figure on Usenet. Blake's militant opposition to all cisgender concepts extended beyond those comfortable with their birth-assigned gender to include those who sought to bring their sex and gender into alignment through surgical means. In her FAQ in particular, Blake would herself weaponize the cisgender/transgender binary

framework in order to exclude those who opposed her ideological positions within trans politics, especially transsexuals. For Blake, one's transgender status arose from how their gender practices, so to speak, and this is reflected in how she defines the "transcommunity:" "the congregation of transgendered people and lifestyles...In many ways the transcommunity is defined by what it is not, i.e. 'Not Cisgendered', a catch basin for all those who do not easily fit the Cisgender ideal." Blake's lifestyle approach and transcommunity, however, did not allow for transsexuals, which she defines under "what is 'transsexualism'?":

> Transsexualism is about obtaining sex-change surgery. No matter how it is justified, this amounts to rejection of one's own transgendered state and a desire to end membership in the transcommunity. The "treatment" for transsexualism does offer symptomatic relief for Internalized Transphobia but the end goal --to become Cisgendered-- is Unachievable.

Transseuxals, as Blake presents them, are misled by their false consciousness to believe they can become "cisgendered," or have their sex and gender align. Nothing, in Blake's worldview, can change one's sex, and transsexuals who try are simply in denial of reality.[19] For Blake, living a transgender lifestyle is an all-or nothing endeavor, and any attempts to "pass" amount to little more than intentional deception:

> In general "Passing" means trying to get people to believe you are someone you are not. (e.g. Gays who pass as straight.) For a transgendered individual this means pretending to be cisgendered; hiding that one is transgendered. Most commonly this is a reference to males who try to deceive people into thinking they are female or females who ask people to believe they are male but Passing also applies to anyone who hides their transgender identity through denial or omission.

[19] Blake's position regarding transsexuality also inspired a rule of the "Laura Blake Drinking Game:" "At any point in the game anyone can be required to take the "Transsexual Challenge" by someone rising up, pointing to the person being challenged and shouting "Internalized Transphobia!". The person being challenged must then say the words "Cisgender Ideal" three times fast. If she fails to do so then she must take a drink, If successful the challenger must take two drinks."

In all of these cases, Blake's position is entirely black and white: one is out or in, one is transgender or cisgender, and no in-between is allowed. Passing is not about, as in its most common contemporary form, about one's gender presentation being validated by others, but about acting out of denial. Mainstream transgender activists, in Blake's view, limited trans freedom to those that fit within the "Cisgender Ideal." Blake encapsulates this viewpoint in response to another poster: "If I want to shave my head, grow a ZZ-Top beard, wear pink tights and a burgandy mini-skirt with a yellow sport coat and orange tie...Acceptance means that's just fine. Anything short of that, anything that prevents it, or causes me to hesitate about doing it, is not freedom...it's a state of oppression." Mainstream activists "don't understand what it means to be free as a transie... they just want permission to be one."

Blake's strident tone, combativeness, and insistence on ideological purity are hallmarks of her posts. An excellent example of these qualities in combination came following the 2001 release of regular poster Lacey Leigh's self-published book, *Out & About - The Emancipated Crossdresser*. Though it's difficult to know just how many people read or purchased *Out & About*, it was one of texts crossdressing organization Tri-Ess regularly donated to libraries for inclusion in their collection. Included in the book was a version or copy, depending on the poster's interpretation, of Blake's "Cisgender Rules," attributed to an unnamed "transgender advocate" described in the acknowledgements as "one of the 'regulars' who held court in that cyber community," a "curmudgeonly Canadian activist whose mission seemed to be one of rubbing us raw with the revolutionary idea of self acceptance and then picking at the scabs of those wounds so they wouldn't scar; sort of 'tough love' approach." According to Leigh, Blake's approach "worked," as "she, and countless supportive others, led, pushed, cajoled, bullied, and harassed me into thinking clearly about all this for the first time."

Whatever goodwill prompted Leigh's acknowledgement was not evident in posters' ensuing debate over whether or not Blake had been properly attributed. The debate-cum-flame war raged in alt.support.crossdressing for much of 2001 and 2002—at its height, posts to alt.support.crossdressing including the phrase "book" would make up 6% of all posts archived by DejaNews, a sizable percentage for the eternally spam-prone Usenet. Leigh claimed Blake had explicitly asked not to be named as the rules' author; Blake claimed Leigh had stolen her intellectual property outright and threatened to sue. Reflecting the depths to which arguments on Usenet could plunge, Blake would accuse Leigh of being a "sociopath" who was in it for the money, leading Leigh to retort that Blake was herself a "screaming, agenda driven, mouth foaming, bi-polar, schitzo/paranoid zealot." As a result of Blake's accusations, Leigh posted that the next edition of *Out & About* (which it's unclear if it was ever published) would be a "'LB free zone'. No mention, no implication, no hint, no name, no acknowledgement, no credit-by-description, nada." Ironically, Leigh would then go on to say that "cisgender" was "not a very important concept in the long run (and in fact sounds rather angry)," leading to her decision to replace the rules with a short paragraph.

2.6: Conclusion: "Cisgender" in the Long Run

Though Leigh might not have seen "cisgender" as being very important in the long run, the concept has persisted. Since it first began appearing on Usenet, "cisgender" has been adopted and used in a variety of wider publics, the largest being the estimated 11.3 million viewers of the 2016 Emmy Awards who heard Jeffrey Tambor, lead actor in the transgender-themed television series *Transparent*, declare "I would not be unhappy were I the last cisgender male to play a female transgender on television." Using the term to self-identify, as Tambor did, is now one of the most common ways to signal one's status as a good transgender ally (Enke 2012). In many

ways, contemporary transgender activism, at the national level, relies on the "'us-them' semantic" Blake found so useful in her arguments: Both the National Center for Transgender Equality and the Transgender Law Center, two of the most visible national trans advocacy organizations, have adopted the term on their sites and in their surveys, reports, and other public documents.

However, Blake's own preferred use of "transgender" has largely faded from use, and concepts like genderqueer have taken its place. This shift is reflected in a 2006 addendum Matthews, an admirer of Blake, makes to her 1997 essay, "Crossdressing and Society: "It's been a long time since I wrote this essay and much has happened in my life since then. I no longer identify as a 'crossdresser'. I identify as solidly Transgender, borderline Transsexual - but most specifically as Genderqueer" (Matthews 1997). Thanks in part to its adoption amongst social service providers, transgender as umbrella category is now the dominant use of the term (Valentine 2007). In effect, transgender and cisgender have reversed their scope: while transgender now covers a broad swath of identities, united by their non-identification with their birth-assigned gender, cisgender has narrowed significantly from a category for all whose sex and gender identity align to those who identify only with their birth-assigned gender. In modern definitions, morphology has given way to biology. Cisgender's adoption by allies like Tambor no doubt contributed to this narrowing: as allies became "cisgender," they excluded those they might be allied with from the category, namely anyone under the transgender umbrella. However, I would argue Blake and other transgenderists' legacy lives on through the adoption of a "cisgender" that moves attention from "wrong" and "right" bodies to gender identity and performance. This legacy wouldn't have been possible, though, without the free-wheeling, flame-throwing, and spam-prone world that was Usenet.

Chapter 3: “You don't need us. You have online:” Understanding the Current Transgender Landscape Online

3.0: Introduction

When my interviewee started making vlogs on YouTube in the early 2010s, he didn’t set out seeking fame and fortune, or any social contact at all. Initially, he began using the internet to research all things related to his new identity: others’ transition narratives, photos of them throughout their transition, new trans-specific vocabulary, medical procedures, names of local therapists and doctors, and legal procedures for changing his official government documents, amongst other topics. A year into his research, he also began watching trans vlogs on YouTube. When one trans vlogger mentioned that she had grown up near his hometown, he contacted her and built up a rapport. One contact led to another, and soon he’d built a robust social network within the YouTube vlogosphere, including some fairly “popular” vloggers.

Inspired by his conversations with them, he started making his own vlogs about transitioning and, as he put it, other “dumb stuff,” like music videos and a fake cooking show called “Top Tranny Chef”—stuff that he and others found entertaining, basically. As a vlogger, his “public facing self” was, “‘Oh, I wanta be the hottest trans guy ever,’ and everyone to think I'm super attractive. [LAUGHS] Even though I don't really feel that way in real life.” He didn’t expect to get much attention, but his vlogs took off. Yet, he notes, “being viewed that way made me think that other people thought I was more exciting than I was.” When viewers would comment that they wanted to “come hang out with [him],” he said he “knew that they would be really bored if they did...The stuff, like the dancing and the cooking, I don't really do that stuff. I

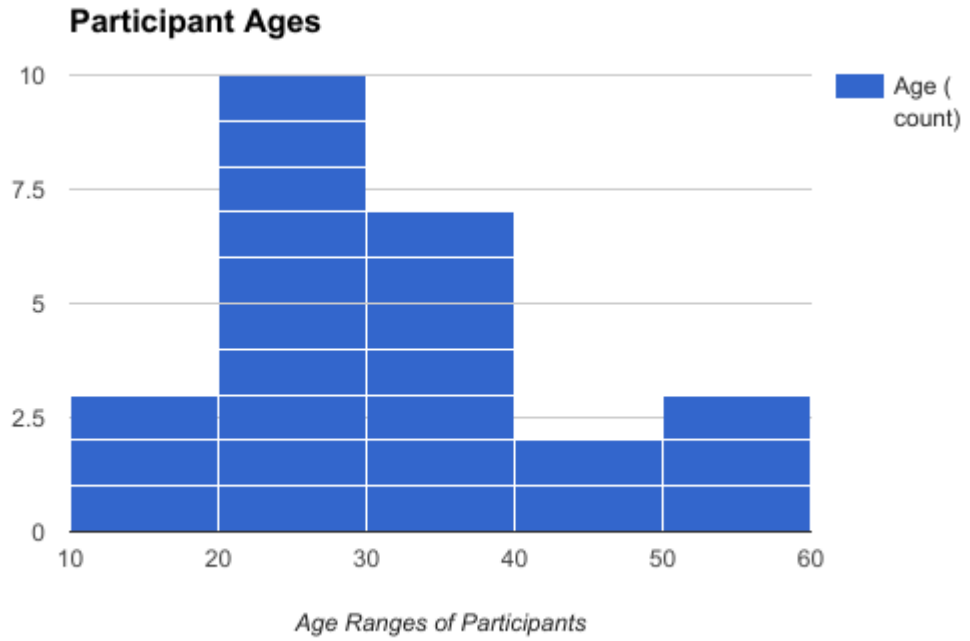
just did it for a show, I guess." As he put it, "everybody thought they were my friend," but "I don't think I felt that way in reverse." For him, YouTube had become a great way for him to meet people, but his really fulfilling communications came in other, more private ways, like travelling cross-country for in-person visits.

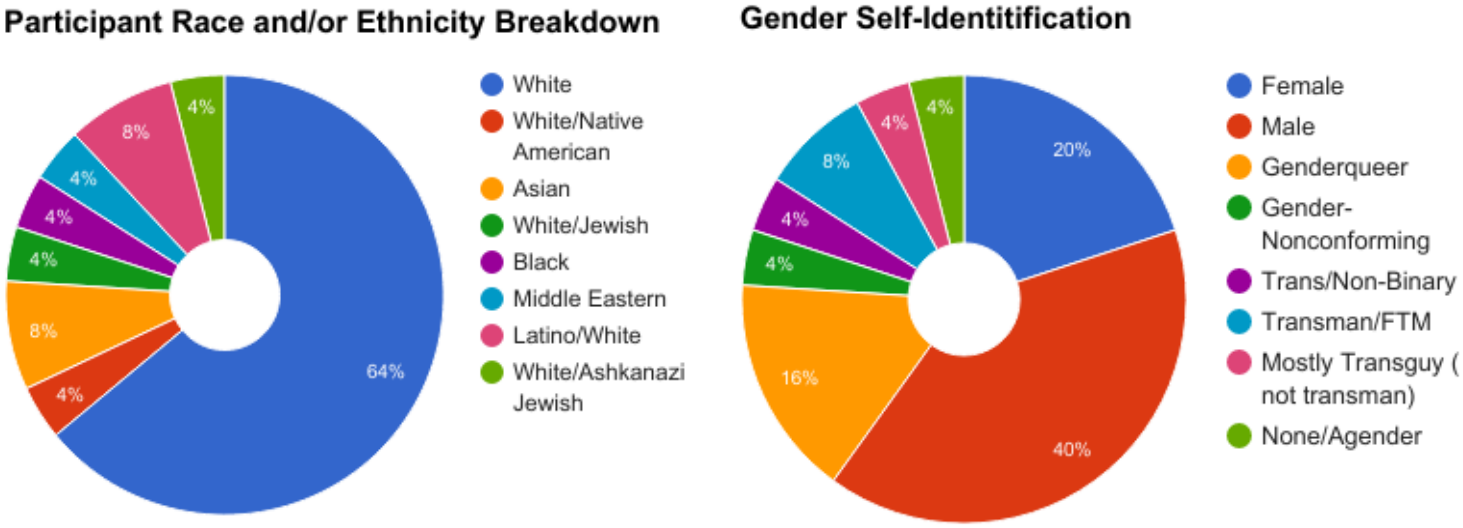
This contrast came into sharp relief near the end of his time vlogging, when he and his partner (also a well-known trans woman vlogger) were invited to give a talk at a regional transgender conference. At the conference, their talk on marriage was packed with "nearly 1,000 people." Some attendees told them they had travelled over 1,000 miles specifically meet both of them. The internet was key to their notoriety: "At one point they were doing photos and it was paparazzi-crazy. I mean, there were like flashes going off everywhere and people were jumping in to get their picture taken and jumping out and then new people were jumping in." The experience was, for both of them, "overwhelming and not really us." He also found, as he got further in his transition, he was less and less interested in limiting his vlogging focus to transition-related stuff. At the point, he said he began to "realize how silly it was." Even though he thought his audience probably cared about his transition-related vlogs, "I don't think I wanted them to care anymore." He also increasingly found it difficult to connect with other younger vloggers he was watching, because "they definitely had different goals or different purposes for being online" and he "didn't find their stuff as interesting." Instead, he sought out "people who happened to be trans who were telling stories about some other part of their life." He no longer makes vlogs, transgender-related or otherwise, only using the internet occasionally for research.

Though the level of visibility he achieved is uncommon, this participant's narrative reflects many key aspects of a trans individual's experience online in the current moment. They start out doing research, turning to search engines to identify a wealth of relevant resources.

They also have access to a variety of online platforms and use their preferred ones regularly. Thanks to recent shifts in mass media coverage and public perceptions of transgender individuals, they're more likely than ever to feel comfortable being open about their trans identity in at least some part of their life, either online or offline. However, their self-presentation online may differ drastically from their offline identity, requiring them to establish clear boundaries between the two. Over time, they may choose to start reaching out to others socially on their chosen social network platforms. Some of these friends, subscribers, or followers will connect based on the content they produce, such as blog posts, pictures, or videos, geared toward a broader unknown trans audience. Nevertheless, shared trans identity does not guarantee that all of their relationships will work out, or that both participants approach them with equal investment. Lastly, their internet use may change or decline over time based on their current life stage or if they consider themselves "post-transition."

These impressions arise from a set of semi-structured ethnographic interviews I conducted in 2013 and 2014 with 25 individuals, all currently living in the United States and ranging in age from 19 to the mid-50s. Interviews were roughly an hour in length, and covered participants' information seeking practices and social interactions online related to trans issues. Because many of my participants had used different platforms throughout their lives, interviews often focused, in part, on the affordances of these specific platforms and their experiences as users. Below is a series of demographic charts, to give a general overview of race/ethnicity, age, and self-identification.





Figures 3.1-3.3: Participant Demographics

These interviews serve as a small window into my participants' experiences communicating with other trans folks, seeking support, and looking for resources online. While the insights I gained from my participants can't be widely generalized, they do give a sense of the diversity of practices users engage in, the sites they visit, and how they do or don't find "community" with others. As I find, the digital is now deeply enmeshed within trans existence to

the point they cannot be fully separated—to successfully ‘be’ trans in the contemporary moment requires you use digital media and platforms at some point. Technologically facilitated expansions in access, scope, and visibility, however, have done little to remedy white norms’ persistent dominance in trans discourse. In fact, the relatively rapid speed at which these technologies were adopted by transgender individuals has led to new issues of opaque algorithmic control, self-segregation, and generational disconnect. Furthermore, their experiences reveal key lacks and gaps in what the affordances of digital technologies can offer.

3.1: Why: Reasons for Internet Usage

While all of my participants had used online platforms and resources, their reasons for doing so varied based on their own personal circumstances. Four major factors were: lack of offline resources, anonymity, ease of access/use, or familiarity.

3.1.1: Lack of Offline Resources

Participants who lacked easy access to local support or resources often turned online to find support. In example, one participant described his local community as very “slim” and lacking a sense of closeness. While he is involved in a support group through his church, it isn’t “clicking” with him. To him, the amount of trans women to trans men locally is unbalanced, so there are not many individuals who share his experience as a trans man. Instead, his primary transgender social connections came through his vlogs on YouTube. For some participants, vlogs in particular were a key resource for making them feel, as one participant described it, like “you're not alone in the universe." Another participant said that because he didn’t have many trans friends in his offline life, his internet usage has an antidepressant effect, helping him “feel less alone and feel hopeful about the changes I may see [in my transition]."

Geographic location can also contribute to the absence of resources. For participants who didn't live near major metropolitan areas, online platforms and media could serve as a major source of support. One participant described their current location as a "conservative college in the middle of Nowhere" in the American Midwest, "so almost all of my information and support comes from online." Another described how moving from a major metropolitan area to a small Midwestern town for graduate school had led hir to rely increasingly on the internet for maintaining social connection and resources. For another participant, he said he didn't know a single trans person in his little town of 600 people. Other than the internet, "there really was nowhere else to go." His online connections allowed him to connect with several regional transgender organizations. Even though distance and time constraints made it difficult to regularly attend their in-person meetings, he was still able to access region-specific information and connect with other trans individuals more likely to be familiar with his geographic and social context.

3.1.2: Anonymity

The relative anonymity of some online interactions was also appealing to some individuals. Several participants, who described themselves as "shy" in offline interactions, said they preferred online interactions. Shy participants' concerns centered, however, not on gender presentation or a "failure" to pass in either offline or online spaces but the face-to-face social interactions required when participating in offline settings and support groups. In example, one self-described shy participant's primarily mode of interacting with other trans folks was the heavily visual platform Instagram, where he posted selfies of his transition progress and connected with other trans men. Yet he was still "working up the courage" to attend an offline transgender-related group, even though he currently lives in what he described as a very queer-

friendly area. Interacting online also shielded interviewees during conflict and disagreement. As one participant noted, “flame wars on the internet are not the same as someone coming to your door and getting in your face and being angry, so I just don't want to open myself up to [in-person confrontation] yet.”

Online anonymity had other advantages. Some participants used the relative anonymity of online spaces to explore different modes of gender presentation and receive feedback. One participant described how the first time they dressed in masculine clothing, they posted photos to a personal journal online. Because they were still developing an understanding of what their gender presentation might be, being able to anonymously post photos online also allowed them to safely be themselves with little social risk. Moreover, when they got home from work later that day, their post was full of “awesome comments” from friends online. For a participant whose gender identity did not follow normative masculine lines, he described being constantly afraid of having his gender presentation questioned and invalidated in non-anonymous, offline spaces. In an online, anonymous space, he feels much more accepted by others.

Online anonymity could also free participants from social constraints they experienced offline. One participant described how, as a trans person at a women’s college, he was always expected to be “the happy, forgiving, totally non-threatening trans person in order to facilitate people's feelings about me being there.” In his online blog, in contrast, he was freed from these expectations and could express frustration or engage with trans issues with a complexity that wasn’t possible in face-to-face encounters. One participant found it much easier to ask “super--personal questions” about how to talk in a feminine way and other possibly awkward parts of gender transition in semi-anonymous spaces online, like Reddit. While she’s since gotten more

comfortable asking these questions in person, that wasn't always the case, because "when you're first getting started, it's like impossible to feel comfortable talking to someone about that."

3.1.3: Ease of Access/Use

Some participants highlighted the relative ease of access to online resources as a big driver of their usage. Using digital resources required no extra effort or were more accessible than print or offline resources such as support groups. Several participants described difficulties or disinterest in accessing print resources, preferring digital formats. One participant described attempting to do research using traditional print materials. However she kept encountering the same set of limited texts in bookstores—a problem which could lead to spending "a lot of fruitless energy looking for this stuff." Online, in contrast, "you go onto Google, you get 1,000 hits. And it's easier to do that. I'm not saying that it's a better way to do it, but it's easier." One participant said he exclusively used online resources, including to access print materials that were recommended to him. For him, the internet just had so much more information on not only transgender-specific content but also "those other things you don't know about. I mean things that you, you have to find information, but it's so deeply buried, but it's not necessarily trans-related" like legal information on changing one's name, social security card, and passport. In contrast, for the participant who attended a conservative college, they worried about openly carrying print transgender-related texts, instead preferring to read such material online or on their iPad in order to prevent inadvertently being outed.

3.1.4: Familiarity

Finally, one of the most commonly cited reasons was existing familiarity. These users were already active online, often on a specific platform, so it made sense to also seek out

transgender-specific information and resources there as well. Since they'd already integrated online use into their social or professional lives, their transgender-related use simply extended their existing practices. One participant, a regular Twitter user, describes how she slowly added gender and genderqueer content to her "daily information diet" on Twitter. Because she already "spend[s] all day on Twitter," it was "a much more natural conversation space for me." The idea of visiting a site specifically for transgender-content outside of her daily routine, in contrast, "feels a bit weird." This practice was particularly true for participants whose primary transgender connections came through Facebook. As one participant described it, she was already "heavily invested in Facebook with friends that I had all over the country" when she started getting ready to come out. For her, her existing connections and familiarity with the platform made searching for transgender-related Facebook Groups, as opposed to starting over on another platform, "the easiest thing for me to do."

3.2: Where: Sites and Platforms Used

My participant sample, as you can see in Figure 3.1, was primarily under the age of 40, with 14 of them between 18 and 30 years old. Unsurprisingly, my participants'' responses mirrored wider social narratives regarding age and social network site preference—Facebook is, as one teen put it to journalist Bianca Bosker, "like the mom and dad version of Instagram and Twitter" (2014). While almost all of my participants acknowledged some Facebook usage, participants under 30 primarily discussed using other platforms like Tumblr, Reddit, Instagram, or Twitter, participants between 30 to 40 reported using Facebook alongside other platforms, and those over 40 (with one exception) cited Facebook as the only platform they used for transgender-related social connections. Participants who reported using multiple platforms saw each of them as filling different uses, such as research or socializing. In example, one participant

who used Reddit, Tumblr, and Twitter, saw each platform having a distinct use. She primarily used Reddit for research, because she knew she would always get a response to her questions in AskTransgender. Tumblr, in contrast, was for making social connections either with other queer users or sharing silly pictures. Her Twitter presence, while social, was not focused on making intimate connections, but for reaching out to 'less accessible' people, often trans micro-celebrities like Merritt Kopas.

Beyond mainstream platforms, several participants also cited Fetlife, a social network site for those interested in BDSM, fetishism, and kink, as a useful source of information and social support. At the time of my interviews (2013-2014), Fetlife was one of the only social network sites that allowed users to self-identify as transgender from the outset, and included, according to one participant, "like ten different options for gender." This allows users to self-disclose of their own volition, but the site's limited search functions make it more difficult to out trans individuals. Participants who used the site found Fetlife to be a welcoming, "wonderful" space, and had "the closest I've found to, like, an actual support group for genderfluid people."

Several participants reported using less contemporary formats like chat rooms and Yahoo Groups to seek out information, but none of them used these sites as primary resources or sources of social support in their day-to-day life online. Furthermore, though transgender-specific message boards like Laura's Playground and Susan's Place have been a long-standing part of the online transgender landscape, only one of my participants reported long-term usage of transgender-specific message boards, specifically the My Husband Betty community forums. Several participants found message boards were most useful when used as archives for gathering information, particularly when forum threads came up in search engine results. However, multiple participants, especially those under 30, expressed skepticism about the usefulness of

message boards as social forums. One participant contrasted her experience on Reddit and Tumblr versus message boards:

> They were actually active, they felt alive, whereas Susan's Place didn't. It felt like a really static environment whereas, go on Reddit and it's just like new posts are there every day. We're upvoting, interacting, all that stuff. I feel like I got more of a response...there was newbie questions that I had that I felt like I actually got good answers to. It's easy to search. I dunno, it's more like a form over content kind of thing, y'know? And I understood Reddit, it made sense versus a broken old forum software that isn't updated anymore.

The same participant also had difficulty interpreting semi-anonymous message board accounts as authentic in the same manner as a user's presence on a contemporary social network site. On social network sites she felt like she could talk to "real people," but on message boards, she felt much less emotional resonance. There, according to her, "it's a bunch of people with pin-up models as their avatars and they're, like, 'I like wearing women's clothing,' and you're like, 'oh no, I don't know if I can identify with this crew.'"

Hyper-gendered visual design in either a site or a message board could turn participants off as well. Several participants commented on how sites' "sparkly" or "pink" designs marked an extreme femininity that didn't match their sense of self. As one participant described it, the site design reflected a concept she'd encountered online: entering into the "pink fog," "the feeling of adopting femininity to its illogical, slippery slope extreme." One participant recounted her first encounter as a questioning teenager with such designs: "I just remember being like, 'what the fuck?' I kinda feel like this applies to me, but like, 'what the fuck is this?'" The hyper-femininity created a sense of distance between her own sense of gender and the gendered norms presented through site design, which she found "super weird and a little off-putting." For her, it was difficult to relate the message board's visual aesthetic to her own sense of self.

3.3: Researching Information Online

Participants' transgender-related online research was often driven by their needs at the time, which varied according to a variety of factors, including current geographic location, personal self-identification, and their interest in medical intervention, including medical procedures they had received or wished to pursue in the future. For participants who considered themselves currently transitioning or whose gender identity was not binarily oriented, research was an ongoing process they pursued in a variety of ways, from extensive reading, using search engines to identify key resources, to seeking out social connections who might have more information. Participants who didn't view themselves as actively in transition, in contrast, perceived themselves as beyond the "research" stage and their use was primarily focused on social connections. One participant who described herself as "post-transition" said that while she had been active online throughout her transition, including recommending resources for others online, her own interest in participating had waned over time: "it's almost, okay, I've got my shit together, I really don't need to be talking about this or reading about this so much, for 3 to 4 hours a week or an hour a night or whatever...There are other things that I'm more interesting in talking about and doing."

Lastly, some participants viewed their transition as a cyclical process, where their research and usage patterns increased or decreased based on their needs at the time. One participant described his transition as progressing in "phases," which his internet use mirrored. He began seeking information on top surgery, looking for surgeons, results photos, and first-person narratives. He also shared his results online post-surgery but reduced his online use following his marriage. Now that he's considering pursuing bottom surgery, it's "like starting all over," seeking out the same kind of resources.

3.3.1: Resources and Information Sought

In their research, participants used a variety of venues and resources, listed with descriptions in Table 3.1.

Resource Type	Examples Mentioned
Standalone Transgender-Specific Website	Hudson's FTM Resource Guide, Susan's Place
User-Produced Content	Blog posts (First Person Narratives), Instructional Vlogs
Message Boards	Susan's Place Message Board, Laura's Playground
Social Groups/Social Network Sites	Topic-specific Yahoo or Facebook Groups; Reddit subreddit AskTransgender
LGBTQ-specific nonprofit or advocacy organization website	Lambda Legal, Transgender Law Center, Regional LGBTQ health clinics
Scientific Research	Scientific Studies; Medical Articles

Table 3.1: Participant Resources

Participant need often determined what resources they would seek out. Overall, participants usually preferred first person narratives, especially those that included photographs and other visual content. Some described visiting or using standalone transgender-specific websites or organizational websites, but these resources were primarily foundational—they gave readers terminology and a general understanding of a topic—and they were almost always supplemented with first-person narratives. Participants who described themselves as interested or invested in science were also more likely to also seek out authoritative scientific or medical documents. Social spaces, however, were not always seen as being universally useful or reliable sources of new information. Questions posted to the subreddit AskTransgender, according to participants who used it, got frequent and sometimes detailed responses. Facebook Groups,

however, were described by one participant as a "kind of a crapshoot:" "it's like this person who might have helpful information about this or they might not, y'know?...There's occasionally like really helpful resources, but like 1 in 100." Even if they weren't asking questions directly, participants used the responses to others' questions to gather information and identify key resources. As one participant saw it, "that happens a lot online. Someone will be like, 'I have a question about this,' and then this helpful person is like, 'Here are places with information about that.' So I learned a lot through that process, lurking on other people's questions." As noted earlier, this was one of the primary function message boards served for several of my participants.

Research topics varied, but included information on hormone replacement therapy (HRT), medical procedures, changing legal name or identifying documents, and gender presentation (sometimes colloquially referred to as "passing tips"). The visuality and easy access of digital formats made them particularly useful for research related to gender presentation. As one participant put it, "There's like certain things you have to do online to be trans, I think. And, like, that are related to, like, looking trans. [Online is] where I learned to do that." YouTube in particular was a frequently referenced resource for gender-related activities that involved multiple steps, such as makeup application. For one participant, "YouTube became a kind of space where I could figure out how do I do a smoky eye without looking like I've been punched in the face, which is apparently a constant problem for me." Unlike a print text, which relies on static pictures, video tutorials can be stopped, slowed down, or rewound, allowing viewers to re-watch sections until they feel proficient enough to continue. Online shopping also allowed participants to take a 'trial and error' approach to gender presentation. Participants could order clothing or shoes online without having to interact with clerks or hunt for rarely stocked sizes,

try items on, and easily return them if they didn't fit. Online storefronts also make it much easier for individual to find and purchase trans-specific items like chest binders.

Beyond YouTube, however, participants remembered few specific resources by name beyond major nonprofits' websites or several long-standing transgender specific websites. Instead, participants' description of their research focused primarily on specific topics or media formats they sought out, or the specific keywords that they used in their research. When they did speak of resources, they were often in very general terms, such as "a lot of different websites" or "some personal sites for trans guys," or specified the search platform they used, such as Google. Nearly half of my participants made at least one reference to using search engines (often through a generic reference to "googling" something) as an information source. In some cases, the term "googling" itself served stood in metonymically for a whole variety of research practices. For several participants, these searches were their initial point of encounter with transgender identity. One participant described, following her personal realization she felt better identifying as a girl, how she went to Google to search for more information:

> The term 'transgender' kept coming up, but I had no idea what that meant. So I wound up looking up a bunch of video logs on Youtube. And, um, I was watching a YouTube video by someone named Grishno, and I don't remember what the video was, but I remember right about then, I was like, 'that, that does describe me pretty well.' [PAUSE] It just kind of hit me then, y'know?

In this way, search engines could serve as key information brokers for participants, shaping how they understood their own emergent identity or what transgender content and media they consumed. Participants often described using basic keywords such as "transgender", "MTF", or "FTM" to start their search and then branching out to include more specific terms as they learned them—most often from their search results. For one participant, he knew no trans people when he came out, so Google played a "huge" role in his information gathering: "it was

pretty much all just Google and figure out what comes up." Through Google, he learned the key terms he needed to find about more about hormone replacement therapy and chest-binding. Another participant described his first Google searches as "pretty basic," just using the term "transgender." Through his searching, he encountered ftmtransition.com, which shaped his earliest conceptions of what transition, female-to-male transition specifically, might look like:

> He had a bunch of photos, and that was the most fascinating thing. He put up every photo that he's ever had, from when he was a baby to now. And it was this one photo in particular of him eating soup, and [LAUGHS] there was something about that picture. He just looked like a guy, and I was so impressed with his—the change that he had gone through. And so I basically looked at that site all the time, and um, just over and over again, just to get information about his life, what he had done, um, yeah...I never contacted him or anything, I just [PAUSE] dreamed. It's kinda this crazy thing.

However, few participants questioned the influence of algorithmic filtering on these results. When asked about how they make sense of Google search results, one participant said they relied primarily on the preview text to determine if a site looked "helpful," only going through 3 or 4 links at most, all of them on the first page. The presumed objectivity of the Google search algorithm meant search results could also include information that denied, challenged, or mocked one's identity. A participant who identified as genderfluid (whose self-identification and presentation fluctuates daily) described the one time they searched for "genderfluid support group:" "I actually found a lot of forums, um, and I think one of them started with someone going 'What's up with that genderfluid crap?' And someone else is like, 'I don't know, what the f? Is it even a thing, because your body's your body.' And I was like, okay, that's not helpful at all." They continued to use Google, but over time learned to identify platforms, like Tumblr, which were more likely to have useful or supportive content. Only one user described avoiding using Google altogether. Similar to the genderfluid participant, he described receiving search results dominated by, in his terms, "hateful" materials. Instead, he

searched primarily on YouTube, because it has a "much higher turnover of positive, trans affirming materials."[20] Absent the ability to implement an algorithm that better reflected his own preferences and desires, this participant's deliberate choice of platform reflected an attempt to assert more curatorial control over the kind of content the search algorithm would present him with. In doing so, however, he also limits his exposure to a wide variety of other content. Though rarely acknowledged in the literature, the sizable presence of search engines in my interviews suggests that search algorithms play an important role in defining transgender-related concepts for a generation of individuals newly claiming a transgender identity.

3.3.2: Determining Informational Credibility

As part of my discussion with participants about their research practices, I asked them how they differentiated between information they believed to be valid or factual, and information based on rumor or myth. Though individual processes varied across participants, the criteria they used to judge information, in either positive or negative terms, generally fell under three categories: authority of the speaker, use of anecdotes and personal experience, and age/timeliness.

3.3.2.1: Determining Authority

A big part of determining credibility was establishing, first, who counted as an authority, and second, what established a speaker's authoritative status. Participants had differing opinions around what authority was, sometimes in shifting contexts. The biggest divide amongst participants was whether they gave credibility to those commonly perceived as medical

[20] I find this perspective particularly interesting given YouTube's status as a product of (or more apropos, a letter in) the Alphabet. Inc. company, formerly Google, Inc. It raises interesting, if unaddressed, questions about perceptions of "purity" to user-produced content versus the "neutral" search engine and how to differentiate between the various algorithms used for Alphabet's various products (Google Search, YouTube, etc.).

authorities, such as doctors, endocrinologists, and medical researchers. This divide reflects the long history of medicalizing transgender identity, medical authorities serving as gatekeepers to needed care, and subsequent pushback against these efforts (Namaste 2005). Some participants, particularly those self-described as science-oriented, sought out information from medical authorities first and were more skeptical of anecdotal information. Finding credible information online, was "the hardest part," according to a one participant: "I'm a huge fan of science-based research, and I really like to make sure I'm getting good information, but it's kind of like looking for water in the desert sometimes to go and find it." Another said she took all information online "with a grain of salt until I was actually in front of a doctor in the office...You can have opinions all day and things can make sense, but if you don't have training and you haven't actually dealt with it or anything, you really can't say." Others, in contrast, were skeptical of medical authorities and more inclined to trust information that was, as one participant put it, "for us, by us." One participant described his frustration at being told a variety differing information by doctors throughout his transition—which was particularly concerning given that these were supposed to be people who "in a classical sense are accurate purveyors of information."

For non-medical information, participants used a variety of methods to determine speakers' authoritative status. Some participants sought out speakers who included citations to other sources, which allowed them to 'check' the information in posts if they desired. Others trusted speakers with high in-group visibility or a long online history. One participant described the process as "subconscious networking:" "You see a certain author's name come up enough times, and you kind of start to develop a sort of trust of that name. And so I think you repeat that process enough, you kind of have what would probably be called intuition, but I think really just based on networking." Social media, to them, was particularly good for formalizing "the process

of forming intuitions about stuff...if it's three people who I know, follow these three media figures and I can have a degree of confidence in my personal relationship to these three individuals that I can be likely to trust the information of people they follow." In this instance, this participant assumes visibility or social capital are a direct representation of credibility, and all those in his social network are rational actors whose judgment cannot be influenced by the underlying platform affordances, such as a search or similarity algorithm, that might have made these credible individuals so visible to users in the first place. As with the use of search engines for research, the influence of algorithmic infrastructure on user choice continues to go unrecognized or unseen.

For some participants, similarity of political values added to a speaker's authority and credibility. This was a particular concern to some gender nonconforming participants and participants with self-described "radical" politics. In example, one participant said he would be particularly skeptical of information that came from an assimilationist perspective, which would suggest transgender individuals should adopt highly normative gender identities and 'blend in' with society at large. One agender participant described always checking if a resource uses "the words that I like to describe trans people" in order to determine credibility. This terminology check signaled the speaker's ideological position regarding which individuals and identities, such as their own, 'counted' as transgender.

3.3.2.2: Use of Anecdotes and Personal Experience

Participants also differed on the importance of anecdotes and personal experience. Some participants preferred anecdotes and personal experience to, as one participant described it, "uncommented, impersonal advice." Instead, they trusted "the ones where people are like, 'This is what I've gone through, this is my opinion, this is what's worked for me.' And then I know,

okay, I can take it with a grain of salt, but I know what they're talking about, they have experience." Their personal experience offered evidence of their credibility as an information source. Another participant used personal experiences to augment information he found online. He described how, before he started taking testosterone, he worried he might experience undesired side effects often mentioned online, such as "roid rage" or a shift in his sexual orientation. Over time he learned differently based on his own experience and reading others' experiences.

Others felt that information centered on personal anecdotes was a form of unverified opinion, especially regarding medical issues. One participant was very careful to distinguish between opinion and "actual medical facts." He perceived much information online being presented as narrative, framed in terms of "I heard that…" or "This is very common…," to which he responded, "well, how do you know this?" One participant noted that, ultimately, she had difficulty assessing her own attitude toward personal anecdotes because "one of the things you always hear is, my experience is personal...I'm hesitant to tell anyone, 'because this happened to me, it's likely to happen to you' because you don't know that, you don't know the other person's background, their story, you don't know what's going on inside their head." The marker of a more credible speaker, often those who have "been out for awhile," was that they urged caution and told others not to use their personal experience as a sole reference point. Ultimately, some participants just attempted to consume as much information as they could find and look for an emergent consensus from repeated references or content. This was one participant's research process when he was selecting a surgeon for top surgery. The surgeon he ultimately chose, Dr. Charles Garramone, kept popping up during his research. Because so many people had used

Garramone, he felt he could trust this doctor as opposed to others. As he put it, “so many people pile up in one pile, you’re going to that pile and see what everybody’s talking about.”

3.3.2.3: Age/Timeliness

This category, unlike the others, focuses not on the individuals providing the information but the content itself or platform on which it’s presented. Similar to participants’ perceptions of message boards, some participants were skeptical of ‘older formats’ like static websites, viewing information from social media resources as more reliable. In example, a participant who was look for information about changing her legal name first checked a “normal” website, but was immediately skeptical of the information because she could see the site hadn’t been updated in 5 years. However, she could clearly see dates and other social metrics on Reddit posts, giving her more trust in the timeliness of their information. Site design could play a role as well: one participant noted he was less likely to treat websites with “out of date” designs as credible sources. Site age could counterbalance these perceptions, however. The same participant did trust Hudson’s FTM Guide in spite of its limited updates because “people talk about it all the time.”

3.4: Making Social Connections Online

Participants’ socializing online varied based on individual circumstances. For those with little to no offline transgender social connections, online platforms provided a key social outlet for connecting and communicating with other trans individuals. Those who reported having ongoing offline social connects to queer and transgender individuals or groups focused less on building social connections, instead using online platforms to maintain these existing connections. All participants were, to varying degrees, visible as trans in some portion of their online lives. However, how they defined visibility and on what platforms or to whom they were

visible varied on a case-by-case basis. On platforms less likely to be tied to one's offline legal identity, such as Tumblr, YouTube, Twitter, or Reddit, participants actively signaled their trans identity through their posting, link-sharing, or tag usage. On Facebook, in contrast, multiple participants described actively managing their visibility, especially when family members were active users.[21]

Participants managed their visibility through practices including maintaining separate Facebook accounts, selective filters and sharing lists, and selective posting practices. One participant described having two accounts: an "official [public] account," indexable by search engines, that they rarely used but maintained as their public face to employers and a not indexable "parachute account" that serves as their primary account and contained little information related to their offline identity. As they described it, "there's like a universe over here and a universe over here...There's the trans me which is over here, and there's—this public--facing side which I want to just put out there to have." Others thought carefully about what they posted and shared and who could see it. One participant served on the board of a non-profit whose members, as she put it, had varying degrees of LGBT tolerance. Because most of her social media work as a board member was conducted on Facebook, she was more "guarded" on Facebook, thinking carefully about what she shared; she also maintained several different privacy filters. Even for those who didn't engage in management on Facebook, their ability to be out sometimes hinged on the lack of a family presence on the platform. In example, one participant, who was active in his campus LGBTQ group and out to all of his friends and

[21] Facebook's emphasis on accounts that reflect one's 'authentic' identity and its focus on collecting advertiser-friendly metrics have led to a fraught relationship, at best, with its for transgender and non-binary users (Bivens 2015, Bivens and Hamison 2016, Hamison and Hoffman 2016).

instructors, stated unequivocally that it would be impossible for him to be out on Facebook if either of his parents used the platform.

Lastly, some participants used link sharing as a way to signal their transgender identity through implication or offer space to discuss transgender topics with those in their wider social circles. One participant framed their sharing as having a "silent conversation" about transgender topics with others and making their trans status known. As they put it, "I don't really put a filter on what I put out there and I haven't had to worry about any direct conflict with that...I find it a lot easier to just put whatever out there, then kind of actually have not a confrontation, but not have to explain myself or whatever." Another participant framed hir sharing practices as using "insider language" to signal their trans status: "like when I post something or share something publicly from these music artists, people who know I identify as trans are like, 'oh, hey, that's why ze is sharing this,' right? But then other people, like my brother or family members or things like that, are kind of like, 'oh, maybe that's just what, maybe this is just a musical interest,' right?" Several participants who described themselves as one of the only trans individuals in their social circles said their sharing practices were informed by their desire to share information or build shared social context with their friends or colleagues. One participant, who portrayed his friends list as "90% [people] who think they get it," said he shares links in part in order to "clue them in when something big thing happens in the trans world. Because they should know about that, and they're not going to because they don't, they're not tapped in to, like, trans people." These items help him establish a "shared vocabulary" so that when they're hanging out socially, "and I'm like, 'did you hear about that shitty thing that happened?' And they're like, 'yeah, I read it on your Facebook. That's awful. Whoa!'"

3.4.1: Intimacy and Friendship

Regardless of platform, few participants reported seeking ongoing relationships with other trans individuals online. Instead, participants' usage was primarily phatic and self-centered—content focused on their individual context but oriented toward connecting with an invisible audience.[22] When a social connection was made, the relationship couldn't be based only in shared trans identity. An enduring relationship required both individuals shared other common interests and experiences. As one participant put it, the assumption is "'I'm trans, you're trans, we should be friends!' No! You've got to have more than that." This participant's strongest online friendship was with an individual who had a similar background. The strongest friendships would extend beyond the online platform. Every participant who said they began at least one lasting friendship on one of these platforms no longer primarily maintained it through the platform, but instead moved their communication to more intimate spaces, such as texting, phone conversations, up to regular offline meetups.

Social attention could also be spread unevenly among users online. Several participants described having been "highly visible" as trans online beyond their immediate social circles. For these users, friendship was a much more fraught endeavor. Instead of focusing on one-to-one connections, these users—both trans male-identified vloggers, one a trans man of color, one white—reported many individuals reaching out to them unprompted, or making assumptions about them based on their public persona. In these cases, participants described a process of self-

[22] Though Facebook bills all social connections users make as "Friends," few participants reported making strong friendships through the platform; instead, users primarily connected with people they had encountered in other contexts (works, school, social activities). Unlike other major social platforms, Facebook integrates both a closed Group format and a chat client. These affordances offered users some privacy and assumption of synchronous activity, but few participants found these shared spaces effective spaces to meet new individuals. Several participants reported encountering high levels of social strife in Groups, making them hesitant to participate in or avoid Groups altogether.

presentation that resembles the mechanisms of self-branding: a semi-cultivated self-presentation that focused on specific, distinct aspects of the self (Marwick 2013). Though neither of these participants were focused on increasing their 'salability,' their efforts did have some positive effects. The participant of color felt it important to add to the visibility of trans people of color online and share his knowledge, especially around physical health and fitness. As he documented his own weight-loss journey in his vlogs, viewers were engaged—one even told him he was now their phone background and his picture was their 'inspiration' to get fit.

The other participant, whose story opened this chapter, was never fully comfortable with his fame. Due to a variety of factors, neither he nor his wife vlog anymore, but they're still occasionally recognized for their videos. Now, he finds this recognition "mostly...irritating [LAUGHS]" because his vlogs were from a different time in his life. Yet those who remember him seem to "want to follow me home or something" or want to hang out once they learn where he lives. He wasn't interested, though, because "we don't have any point of connection other than you saw a video and you identify as trans. That's not enough for me."

A different participant, who did not vlog but had watched vlogs early in his transition, described a similar disconnect from the individual in the vlog and the individual in daily life. Once he moved to a metropolitan coastal city, he encountered a well-known vlogger whose identity now differs wildly from how they presented themselves in their vlogs. In building a relationship with them he had to differentiate their offline self from "their legacy that continues to live on in YouTube."

3.4.2: Following Practices

Except for Facebook, all of the platforms participants used were built on a model of directed friendship, where mutual following is not required (Marwick and boyd 2011). However,

participants, with a few exceptions, reported seeking out individuals from similar demographic groups, life stage, and/or at a similar point in transition. Some participants also expressed a distinct disconnect with those who didn't share these criteria, though for different reasons. Participants of color reported seeking out other trans people of color, but whiteness dominated in discussions and amongst users. As one participant noted, even though YouTube was an important platform for trans men of color, its most visible users were "white trans bros...who are overly invested in being dudely and muscular and straight-looking and straight-acting." A similar emphasis could be found in product choices, which favored "white skintones." In some cases, participants of color ultimately found their identity better reflected in offline spaces, which used community-specific frameworks and terminology. As one participant put it, he found his more non-normative gender identity "affirmed" in these spaces, whereas online the only language and frames of reference usually visible were those of white trans people. For him, it was "really helpful and important" to know there were viable gender frameworks available other than the popular transgender, genderqueer, and agender narratives.

In contrast, white participants (who made up over half of my sample) rarely commented on the racial or ethnic background of those they followed but did focus on similarity of age or life stage. This absence of awareness suggests not that these participants were deliberately avoiding following trans people of color, but the particular insidiousness of structural racism in social platforms. It's possible that, if prompted to consider the question by me, participants may have recognized and commented on the limited visibility of trans people of color online. However, the platforms participants reported using are designed to suggest possible social connections based on "similarity" to existing interests and following practices. They has a compounding effect: the more "people like you" you choose to follow, the more likely you are to

have those users (and their posts, tweets, or videos) recommended to you. On the macro level, this means that certain users, the "white trans bros," become some of the most visible trans users on the platform. Several participants also expressed similar concerns about the lack of "shared" trans spaces online, as trans men/masculine and trans women/feminine individuals preferred certain platforms or spaces. As one participant put it, in their experience on Reddit "there's like a nice entrenched transgender lady space," while "all the trans guys are on Tumblr."

However, some participants—specifically, young trans men/masculine folks— described conscious attempts to rethink their following practices. In example, one participant described his early YouTube vlog watching habits as being focused exclusively on white trans men and masculine people within five years of him. At the time, he was looking for someone who would speak to his experience. But when reflecting on it during the interview, he recognized how the "white-coded" search terms he used, such as FTM and transman instead of stud, aggressive, or AG (all more common among LGBTQ people of color) determined what videos he saw and what similar videos were suggested to him. In his recollection, "the universal whiteness of the trans information that I was finding" stood out. Since then, he's sought out a much wider variety of authors and users to follow. Another participant realized just how white his following practices were once he encountered people online who were "more critical about who made up their network in real life and online." After that, "I was like, 'Oh, it's kinda shitty to only like read people who are like me. Oh, I don't like this in real life, why would I like this in my online identity?" A third participant was "so ecstatic" to connect with trans women through Twitter, because he didn't know many trans women. On Twitter, he could follow their conversations and learn more about their specific experiences. These choices were often framed in terms that

mirrored popular discussions of allyship: being a better ally required knowing more about the experiences of others unlike themselves.

3.4.3: Generation Gaps

However, few participants described similar attempts to connect with users across significant age gaps. In reflecting on age online, multiple participants commented on the persistence of a larger "generation gap" in transgender spaces. In part, this gap can be attributed to changes in social and support-seeking practices amongst trans individuals. For many years, in-person support groups and gatherings were a key part of transgender socializing. However, few participants reported attending formal transgender-related support groups, and all of those that had found these groups lacking to differing degrees. Several participants described groups dominated by older trans women whose life and transition experiences didn't match their own. One interviewee, who had been using digital communications since the early 1990s, had tried and failed several times to actively participate in local support groups—which were facing, according to her, consistent growth and sustainability issues. For her, attending in-person meetings "just doesn't seem to resonate," which she suspected was "a generational thing." When she remarked on these generational issues at an in-person meeting, "this woman probably in her fifties, I wanta say, said, 'Well, that's you young kids. You don't need groups, you don't need us. You have online.' And I kind of nodded my head, sort of agreeing. It's like, yeah! I don't need the basement of the Unitarian church here. I'm fine."

Her experiences illuminate why these groups might have problems with growth and sustainability: not only did she see group members' concerns as irrelevant to her personal experience, but the very format of an in-person weekly support group wasn't among her usual methods for seeking peer support—which were primarily online. Another participant also

attempted to connect with a local support group but found its members were significantly older than hir. While their get-togethers were “totally bomb and terrific and fabulous” for members, ze found it hard to connect with them because “our lives are just in really different places and we’re doing really different things.” Online in contrast, ze was able to “find folks that either their age was taken out of the picture and wasn't really a factor [or] creating a barrier or there were kind of some younger folks.”

However, not all participants felt able to connect online with those of a different age cohort. One 36-year-old genderqueer-identified participant described how they felt they were caught in-between both transgender communities—neither a cross-dresser nor a transgender woman—and age cohorts:

> I constantly feel like I have to choose between angry young kids or 50-year-old crossdressers as my community. And I'm not having either set of issues, like being ostracized by my family or my community like those people are dealing with. I'm also not excited by sneaking into my wife's panties...I have difficulty finding the right group or the right resources. I don't need resources the way an 18-year-old does.

They connected this to “the timeline of internet progression” and being part of an age group that “kind of missed the train a little bit”—neither an early adopter nor an individual who had grown up with internet access. This “progression” narrative was also adopted by other participants between 30 and 40, though with a slightly different focus. These users conceived of their online trans-related activity as part of a longer usage history, which moved from pre-SNS formats such as Usenet, BBSes, IRC chatrooms, and message boards, to early SNS like Livejournal, and current use of contemporary sites like Twitter and Reddit. In example, one such participant framed their Twitter use as a replacement for chat clients like IRC—both offered regular, casual social interaction, but Twitter kept a record of the conversation they could go

back through over time. By and large, other participants, both younger and older, emphasized only the platforms they were using now, or had used recently during their transition process.

As noted earlier, younger participants were often disinclined to use or interact with platforms they interpreted as 'old' or 'out-of-date.' These perceptions carried over the message board users as well, who were seen as part of an older generation focused on 'old' debates and skeptical of recent shifts in transgender identity. For the self-described "post transition" participant, her perspective was now "very different than some of the folks that are questioning or just popping in there," and that could make it hard to relate. As she noted, in many trans contexts "you throw a bunch of trans folks together in any context and the perspectives of non-transitioners versus late transitioners versus the folks who literally flew off to Thailand at age 18 to get their surgery, it's all different and sorting it all out isn't easy. But, y'know, it's a community."

3.4.4: Finding Community

Age, identity, and transition status, however, could present obstacles to building community sentiment. Gender non-conforming and non-binary identified participants in particular expressed skepticism of calls to "community." An agender participant described how reading message board posts dismissive of 'genderqueer' identity made her feel particularly alienated from other trans folks. As another genderqueer participant who'd experienced similar erasure put it, "we can't assume even within this trans quote-un-quote community that everyone is on the same page or is ready to be supportive of each other and those kinds of things." Format could also prevent building a sense of connection. One participant said they found more comfort in the social spaces connected to Let's Play videos, even though some users regularly posted transphobic content, because there needed to be "a certain like affective thing…[growing] over

time for me to feel like I can contribute something or have like a meaningful discussion with someone." The videos' episodic nature make it easier for them to find that feeling, versus platforms like Tumblr which were still a post at a time or a thread that passes in a "blip." Even so, they weren't sure if "anybody knows what community feels like...I don't have any vague semblance of what one could look like online or for me." The ephemerality of online interactions lead another participant to prefer the sustained argument of a printed book. Compared to books, people in online conversations, "are figuring things out their politics and opinions, things and how they want to articulate themselves. And in that moment, it might feel like it's permanent and static, but everyone's really kind of groping towards who they are and what they think."

The speed with which these conversations could escalate into arguments was also a concern, and some participants said they specifically avoided Facebook Groups because of their propensity for conflict and "drama." In one case, a participant worried about voicing their opinions online, because they didn't "want to end up on the wrong side of it. Especially when you're like, first getting started with this, y'know, kinda queer theory and stuff like that you're like, 'I don't wanta fuck up. I have so much I need to learn.'" Another participant felt that while users were sometimes held accountable through such conversations, "it can become a little toxic when people make broader assumptions [that] 'you think this way, so it means this about you and it will always mean this about you.'" In those moments, users don't treat the conversation as "a learning process," but "this is just who you are." The most eloquent reflection on the nature of community within and amongst users and formats came from the same genderqueer-identified participant who felt themselves forced to "choose between angry young kids or 50--year--old crossdressers." They were initially surprised by the lack of cooperation amongst LGBTQ individuals online but contributed the sometimes "caustic" level of argument to the age of the

participants, “college age kids” with “really strong opinions and a lot of motivation to go out and change the world.” At the same time, they felt this age bracket also held “the most interesting people and discussions” currently happening online. In the end, keeping up with it all presented interesting possibilities and challenges:

> Message boards are much more of an older generation than things like Tumblr or Twitter. I think Facebook become too big to talk about in any kind of generalities. But Tumblr and Twitter definitely seem to have captured the interest of the generation younger than mine, and I think that is so interesting because message boards, as far as archival purposes and being able to go back and find information, they may be as timeless enough to be useful five to ten years out...I'm kinda curious what we're gonna see years from now, because a lot of what is happening online is happening in a more ephemeral and abbreviated way.
>
> And I wonder ten years from now, will it be harder to search stuff, or will it be things changed so quickly that you don't need to go online and search about all this stuff because it will have already have passed people. I feel like I consume the first generation information formats and the current generation of Twitter and stuff like that. It's definitely too much information to manage. I get to where I'm like, ‘oh, I really don't want to sit down and commit to getting caught up with this.’ So I think that's a struggle that a lot of people deal with. I also feel like I can't just pick one outlet. I feel like if I just did Tumblr I'd be missing out, if I just did Facebook I'd be missing out.

This comment neatly encapsulates the various issues facing transgender discourse and transgender spaces online at the current moment. The increase in transgender visibility within the last ten years means more and more individuals are claiming a trans identity at younger and younger ages. As they seek out connection online, they come in contact with platforms and users from the “first generation,” whose age, attitudes, and ideas about socializing online may differ significantly from their own. However, they choose not to focus their energy on the past or cultivating a social presence on these sites, instead building a place of their own on more comfortable (and often contemporary) platforms.

For these users, who never “lived,” so to speak, on Usenet or a message board, these formats don’t have the same social context. Instead, these formats are more like archival

documents, "timeless enough to be useful five to ten years out," but not a site of social energy—compared to the constant updates of a platform like Twitter, a message board thread might as well be printed on paper. The importance of search algorithms in guiding users' research practices further reinforces the differences between the two. The presumably authoritative algorithm prioritizes the "timeless," static, and easily indexed message board over the rapidly changing, inconsistently indexed social media platform—if they even allow their content to be extensively indexed at all.[23] When users click these sites in their results, they reinforce the algorithm's assessment of them, creating a "pile-on effect," as more and more users look a limited number of texts.

Yet as this participant points out, the future of trans social organizing online also currently seems unclear. The "more ephemeral and abbreviated" nature of interaction on social network sites means users lack a sense of sustained, trans-specific context for earlier formats, making their differences and disconnects come into far sharper relief. Furthermore, as shown in my interviews, participants had clear platform preferences, and were often disinterested in using platforms that did not appeal to them. Users develop a familiarity, comfort, and even sense of ownership over a platform. Given this embeddedness, users' differences of definition or viewpoint become not only about defending their own self-identity, but expelling those who disagree.

[23] Examining the robots.txt for major social network sites (Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Reddit, etc.) reveals that these platforms largely allow indexing at only the level of user pages, not individual posts or content, where the most useful resources would likely be.

3.5: Conclusion: Finding Your Place Online

As my participants' experiences reveal, it's easier than ever to access trans-related information online. Though their reasons differ, all of them used their preferred online platforms for research or to socialize with other trans-identified people. Inversely, they often avoided platforms they were uncomfortable with, especially ones that seemed out of date or old-fashioned. For many participants, search engines like Google were their primary tool for learning more about transgender-related concepts. Search engine results, then, were instrumental in shaping how they understood these concepts. However, few questioned how these search engines filtered the information they received, or how certain resources or information had achieved visibility. Instead, they relied on a variety of methods to vet sources individually, from checking citations, how authors used personal anecdotes, to their alignment with authors' ideological stances.

Of those users they followed or interacted with, participants tended to focus their attention on other users like themselves. Unless they made a conscious effort otherwise, this choice meant their exposure to users of different ages or racial/ethnic backgrounds was limited. The few who consciously chose to follow others from different backgrounds were motivated by their desire to have a vision of trans identity not grounded in hegemonic white gender norms and terminology. Inversely, participants of color sometimes struggled to find their identities represented online, instead focusing their energy on seeking out social connections in offline queer of color spaces. Users also self-segregated by age, which reflected a "generation gap" between not only participants at the lower and upper ends of the age spectrum of my sample but transgender spaces online at large. Younger participants had difficulty connecting through social

formats of the prior generation, such as in-person support groups or message boards, and often avoided them altogether.

Yet despite all of their differences, all of my participants shared one aspect in common: how they described the platforms they used. To them, these sites were not merely a vehicle for communication, but took on the qualities, as Edward Casey puts it, of "*somewhere in particular*" and users are "therefore to be subject to its power, to be part of its action, acting on its scene" (1993, 23). They saw themselves and their identities deeply embedded within their chosen platforms, and in a few cases they had difficulty imagining them existing elsewhere. Even those participants who no longer actively used the internet continued to seek out a place where their identity could thrive—it just happened to now be offline. If in 1998, Stephen Whittle described the internet as "the street on which the transgender community lives" (405), then each of these platforms has come to occupy an address. They are "implaced" through users' interaction on and with them. The platform is insinuated within their collective experience, "altering as well as constituting that collectivity" (1993, 31). This becomes clear in participants' description of their platforms of choice, which have a "felt density...the sense that it has something lasting in it" (1993, 33). These places, I argue, have the structure necessary to support community interactions described in Chapter 1. The platform offers the affective foundation necessary to support moments of community sentiment; even as these moments must fade, participants' sense of place remains. Formats and platforms which—either real or perceived—lack adequate social aspects, in contrast, take on the qualities of texts: static and "timeless," they are not a place for living out your identity, but learning the cultural norms necessary to access places where your identity can live. Instead of being conduits for experiencing community, they merely describe the paradoxical ideal as filtered through their author's cultural norms. They serve as maps or guidebooks,

describing the territory of transgender life and explaining the key landmarks, terms, and symbols. As texts, they do not always hold all users' attention, but attention must have been paid at least once so readers can find the place, that "somewhere in particular" that speaks to them.

The following two chapters will, in turn, consider two common formats within contemporary transgender discourse which best embody this contrast. Chapter 4 examines the complex textuality of transgender informational websites in an algorithmically-driven media landscape. Taking a multi-modal approach, I illustrate how these sites function as archival documents, offering a window into the recent history of web design and transgender discourse. Though they may have had social aspects, they lack the affordances necessary for a contemporary audience to see them as true places for finding community. Yet these same users also encounter these sites through search engine results, whose presumably objective algorithm strips them of their original temporal contexts and represents them as current and contemporary resources. As a result, the algorithmic representation of transgender "community" users receive centers whiteness and respectability—a stark contrast to contemporary intersectional movements.

Chapter 5 focuses on how trans users acquire their sense of "felt density" on one contemporary social media platform, Tumblr, through the platform affordance of tags. Through tags, users express specific self and group identifications, as well as audience and social commentary, through their tagging practices. These tags, part of a larger a trans-specific emergent user-defined tag collection or folksonomy, are the "places" where users gather. However, this folksonomy relies heavily on an existing subcultural vocabulary, limiting users' self-expression to recognizable terminology with unstable definitions. Terms and their usage become an ideological battleground when users' different definitions of transgender identity come into conflict through their tag use—triggering users' sense of displacement. Instead of

finding community sentiment through their interactions, these users react to their perceived displacement by publicly policing and shaming others' usage to strengthen their own claim to platform ownership. In these moments, users rely on the semantic to contain not only a whole range of performative aspects of identity, but the very legitimacy of one's embodied sense of self.

Chapter 4: “The Map Is Not the Territory:” Trans Websites, Temporality, and the Algorithm

4.0: Introduction

My first encounter with a print copy of *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, Harry Benjamin’s landmark text, which initially defined transsexuality as a ‘medical’ condition, caught me entirely by surprise. Through my research, I knew of the text and had read parts of a digital copy. But I had never encountered a print copy, much less an original edition. Yet in a thrift store in rural southern Maryland, shelved in between thick hardback texts, were not one, but *two* different 1966 first editions of *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, the Ace and WarnerBooks printings respectively, alongside a 1968 copy of Christine Jorgensen’s autobiography. Jorgensen was one of the first well-known public transsexual figures post-World War II and arguably Benjamin’s most famous patient. Her autobiography—including an introduction by Benjamin—served as a touchstone text for trans women for many years. The books show their age, with yellowing pages, peeling spines, and that distinct old book smell, “a combination of grassy notes with a tang of acids and a hint of vanilla over an underlying mustiness,” that pervades used and antique book shops (Strlič et al. 2009). Flipping through the texts, they offer few clues to their previous owners. Just a few page numbers noted in one, and some small scribbles and a name in another, “C. Appleby.” I wonder about C: Was the use of a single initial deliberate, a way to avoid gender references, or an unremarkable personal preference? Was C the original owner, or did the text change hands often? Was C themselves transsexual, transgender, a concerned relative, or just a curious reader? How much trans personal history did I hold in my hands?

These questions are not unfounded, given the history of trans-related texts. Medical texts like Benjamin’s were available, but these spoke in primarily clinical terms. Autobiographies and

personal narratives by trans authors, though they were dismissed by medical experts as unreliable, were a key resource for individuals seeking more personally relevant narratives. Autobiographies, such as Jorgensen's *A Personal Autobiography*, Jan Morris's *Conundrum*, or Mario Martino's *Emergence*, presented transsexuality as a journey between two binary embodiments, a process by which the author is transformed and reborn into their new self. Such documentary and archival impulses were and continue to be key elements of trans media practice (Prosser 1999; Meyereowitz 2002). Sandy Stone, a noted transgender author and activist, also speaks of the "'O.T.F.': The Obligatory Transsexual File, a collection of "newspaper articles and bits of forbidden diary entries about 'inappropriate' gender behavior" many trans individuals kept throughout their lifetime (2006, 224).

Beyond autobiographies, individuals might also be able to access information through early movement organizations like the Erickson Educational Foundation (EEF), which served as a national clearing house of information for trans and non-trans populations throughout the 1960s and 1970s, or the organizations that followed its closing in the mid-1970s (Devor and Matte 2007). These texts underlie early American English-language trans counterpublics, signaling a transformative moment of eroding the division between private and public. From these texts, "styles of embodiment are learned and cultivated, and the affects of shame and disgust that surround them can be tested, in some cases revalued" (Warner 2005, 62).[24] To adopt a spatial metaphor, these texts mapped out a growing and developing transsexual (and later transgender) world, noting points of entry, major landmarks, and possible barriers to passage.

[24] However, these autobiographies and other popular media formats offered limited narratives of movement from one binary gender to another highly heteronormative presentation (Prosser 1999; Stone 2006). The dominance of white, middle-class heterosexual norms in these narrative limited the ways trans women of color could represent themselves as anything other than "good" transsexual women: a respectable woman who wanted to be "just like" any other woman (Skidmore 2011).

With the rise of digital communications technology in the late 1980s and early 1990s, these archival impulses moved online. Personal websites, or home pages, offered many of the same possibilities as earlier autobiographies without the associated limitations, like publication cost. They offered new affordances as well, such as highly graphical interfaces, flexible code-based design, and the possibility to use a non-linear, branching structure. In the mid-1990s especially, these sites were seen as an individual's "home" on the "electronic frontier," and they were often designed in ways that mimicked familiar aspects of physical architecture: creators might divide their site up into "areas" or "rooms" or maintain digital guestbooks that allowed visitors to mark their presence. By the mid-2000s, however, social network platforms had overtaken home pages as the epicenter of social interaction online, with many shuttered or abandoned in favor of sites like MySpace or LiveJournal.

Nevertheless, a small set of sites, first created during the so-called "Web 1.0" period, approximately 1995 to 2005, remain an active and prominent part of transgender discourse. This chapter analyses 11 of these sites, selected based on several criteria: their ongoing longevity, their 'name recognition' amongst trans individuals, and their prominence in search results for common terms such as "transgender" or "transsexual." These sites' owners, to varying degrees, maintain an active presence either in name or in content production. Table 4.1 collects basic information: site name and address, owner, site focus, and abbreviation (is applicable). Hereafter, I will refer to site content using owner last name, when known, their first name, or the noted common subcultural, abbreviation of the site's name.

Site Name and Address	Owner	General Focus	Abbreviation
Susan's Place (www.susans.org)	Susan Larson	General trans population	N/A
Laura's Playground (www.lauras-playground.com/)	Laura Amato	General trans population	N/A

T-Vox (http://t-vox.org/)	Zoë Kirk-Robinson and Jennifer Kirk	General trans population	N/A
The Transgender Guide (http://tgguide.com/)	Lori	Primarily trans women	TG Guide
Lynn Conway's Homepage (http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/)	Lynn Conway	Primarily trans women	N/A
The Transgender Support Site (heartcorps.com)	Melanie Ann Phillips	Trans women exclusive	N/A
Transsexual & Transgender Road Map	Andrea James	Trans women exclusive	TS Roadmap
I Am Transgender! (http://iamtransgendered.com/)	Jamie Dailey	Non-medical trans feminine/cross-dresser exclusive	N/A
Hudson's FTM Resource Guide (ftmguide.org)	Hudson	Trans man exclusive	Hudson's
The Transitional Male (thetransitionalmale.com)	Nick Edwards	Trans man exclusive	Transitional Male
ftmtransition.com	Ethan Daniel	Trans man exclusive	N/A

Table 4.1: Sites Analyzed and Basic Information.

These sites, many of them referenced by my participants in Chapter 3, serve as first-line information sources for newly-out individuals—for some, reading them was akin to a "rite of passage" one must go through before they enter into trans spaces. In this chapter, I examine these sites as single-authored cultural texts with generic format affordances and constraints, focusing on four aspects: site design and structure, site purpose and the author's ethos, the presentation and framing of information, and site owner's representation of the transgender "community." Like earlier autobiographies or informational pamphlets, these sites map out the unfamiliar territory of transgender identity, guiding readers on their life journey to their "new" self. However, in their content and design they retain aesthetic, structural, or philosophical connections to the ethos of the home page, which can create moments of interpretive disjunction when sites and/or the information they offer is presented as non-ideological—not expressions of

a single author's viewpoint on transgender identity and the wider the trans landscape, but a simple factual presentation of the world "as it is."

Sites' ideological and temporal aspects are further obscured by their appearance in search results. As I found in Chapter 3, search engines are one of the first sources participants turn to when they wanted to learn more about a topic or find resources. If sites are the guidebooks for the reader's transgender journey, then the search engine maps out the boundaries of the larger territory of possibility for transgender identity. Yet because search algorithms are entirely unequipped to interpret sites' ideological dimensions, their map reproduces the viewpoint of sites' authors—which prioritizes a respectability politics that centers white experiences, norms, and concerns.

4.1: The Age of the Homepage

In order to be able to identify aspects of the home page ethos still present in contemporary sites, we first have to understand just what the home page was, its key characteristics, and how it came to occupy its current location within transgender history. The rise of the personal website in the 1990s was precipitated by a variety of factors. In 1993, the public release of Mosaic (better known by its later name, Netscape Navigator) as the first graphical web browser offered a "wow" factor for webpages and a wider popular appeal. While websites had existed prior to the release of Mosaic, the advent of graphics added a whole other layer of interactivity to the web. The pleasure of Mosaic was, Streeter argues, the "pleasure of anticipation," where the pleasure of the experience becomes intertwined with the anticipation of this pleasure (2011, 126-127). As Streeter puts it, "to engage in the dreamlike, compulsive quality of web surfing in the early days was an immersion in an endless what's next?" (2011,

127).[25] The dot-com bubble followed closely on Mosaic's heels and individual websites began to emerge in force in the mid-1990s, either for professional or personal use. The personal "home page," as it was most often known, focused on "an individual (or couple, or family)" and "centered around the personality and identity of its author(s)" (Cheung 2000, 44). Many of these pages were hosted through then-popular service providers like GeoCitites, Tripod, Angelfire, AOL, and others, all of whom offered free web-hosting space and design tools for novice users. Through the amount of home pages being made during the mid-1990s is difficult to estimate, both Geocities and Tripod estimated in 2000 they each hosted approximately four million webpages (Cheung 2000).

4.1.1: A Room of One's Own

The home page marked a distinct format shift for transgender discourse online. Prior to the wide adoption of home pages, online spaces centered around shared interests or activities, such as Star Trek fandom or a love of gardening, to name a few. As such, transgender individuals primarily congregated and communicated via these shared transgender-specific spaces, and their self-presentation as transgender online was tied to their activity there. In other words, transgender identity was the primary shared characteristic amongst users, and their discussion centered on trans-related topics and content. If they wanted to, say, share pictures of their transition progress, these spaces would be viewed as the appropriate forum for them. Individuals might bring up their transgender identity in other spaces, but that would not be the primary topic or purpose of that space.

[25] Corporations were some of the earliest popular entities who sought to take advantage of the new medium, though many corporate pages' unimaginative designs and content were often derided as little more than non-interactive "brochureware," merely reproducing existing print materials (Ankerson 2010, 182).

With a home page, transgender individuals could discuss and present their transgender identity independent of transgender-specific forums. They might still use these forums and even share their new home pages with other users. Nevertheless, the number of spaces where individuals could share more about their transgender identity—and indeed whatever else they wanted to talk about—had increased exponentially. Users were no longer limited to expressing their views on current debates within transgender politics on, in example, soc.support.transgendered. Now, they could compose whole pages devoted to their views without ever having to directly engage their reading audience. Transgender users went from having a limited set of options for discussing transgender issues with a broad audience to, in effect, each being able to have a digital room of one's own online to write themselves and their experiences into existence. In many cases, the line between site and creator blurred, and the home page became a direct embodiment of its creator's opinions, interests, and desires. Users would delete and remake sites as their identities shifted; Karl Surkan chronicles how one user, "Zane," repeatedly deleted and rebuilt his website to match his changing self-identity, leaving behind only a "ghost in the machine" (2003, 275).

Many transgender home pages were not maintained indefinitely, however, as updates dropped off and owners moved on.[26] Surkan specifically cites the example of owner Nathaniel Wolfe, who stops updating his online transition journal by drawing a "distinction between 'life' and the environment of his home page," which Surkan argues "suggests that he perceives the virtual space he has created as a place to document his life and gender identity rather than a

[26] While the single-authored home page or website could theoretically persist in perpetuity, users did not always continue to occupy their web home. Home, Jay Prosser says, is "a powerful organizing trope" for the transgender movement. Transsexuality would seem to run toward it, queer performativity away from it, and transgender is filled with ambivalence toward notions of home, territory, political identity, and affiliation (1999, 177). Home, however, remains undefined, and "that there is no place like home, however…recognizes that home is, on some level, always a place we make up, that belonging is ultimately mythic" (1999, 205).

location in which to live it" (Surkan 2003, 269). As Wolfe became more comfortable with his embodiment outside of his home page, he felt less need to maintain it. New social platforms—first journaling platforms like LiveJournal, then contemporary social network sites (SNS) such as Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook—began to emerge, offering the kind of customization and space to publish once could get with a home page, but without the technical hassle of using HTML. Increasingly, the focus was placed not on the presentation of self through design and decoration but on the individual's self-presentation within the platform's profile, and its accompanying affordances and constraints (Hodkinson 2015). As a format, the personal home page has largely been replaced by the "website," a collection of static, linked documents that often serve informational or explanatory purposes. In contrast to social media or blogs, the website is presented as a supposedly value-neutral collection of texts. An informational website, by definition, lacks a distinct authorial voice, and thus the home page's sense of ownership and place—a function that has now been given over to social network sites.

The sites I study here exist caught in-between these two formats. These sites are, for their owners, deeply personal endeavors that affirm their own success as transgender individuals. Depending on their moment of creation, these sites carry traces of their home page era origins in design or content. Over time, owners' identity has become inextricable from the site itself. Yet owners are simultaneously invested in presenting their sites as contemporary resource "websites" focused on providing high-quality information to the widest audience possible. In practice, these two goals come into conflict when owners attempt to minimize or obscure their own in favor of a value-neutral, text-centered "resources" framework.

4.2: Visual Design

While personal websites, often hosted on university-provided server space, preexisted the home page as a popular medium, these services were instrumental in popularizing the practice. In particular, their built-in coding tools made web design approachable to those without a background in web design or hypertext markup language (HTML) (Papacharissi 2002). For LGBTQ individuals, including youth, these sites offered the possibility of empowerment for queer populations who were otherwise invisible in their existing media landscape (Driver 2005). Paul Hodkinson notes that these spaces, particularly for youth, were understood as "intimate personal spaces" not unlike the bedroom, where site owners could build and perform identity (2015, 3). On non-professional sites especially, a recognizable visual style emerged, with a heavy emphasis on the use of tables, repeating background images, blinking text, pop-up windows, animated graphics interchange format (GIF) images, primary colors, and Comic Sans font (Rieder 2000). Visitors were tracked through page-visitor counters and guest books, where they could leave short comments for others to see (See Figure 4.1). The style is now parodied by tools like the Geocities-izer, launched in 2010 by web developer Mike Lacher, which bills itself as able to "make any webpage look like it was made by a 13-year-old in 1996" (Lacher 2016).

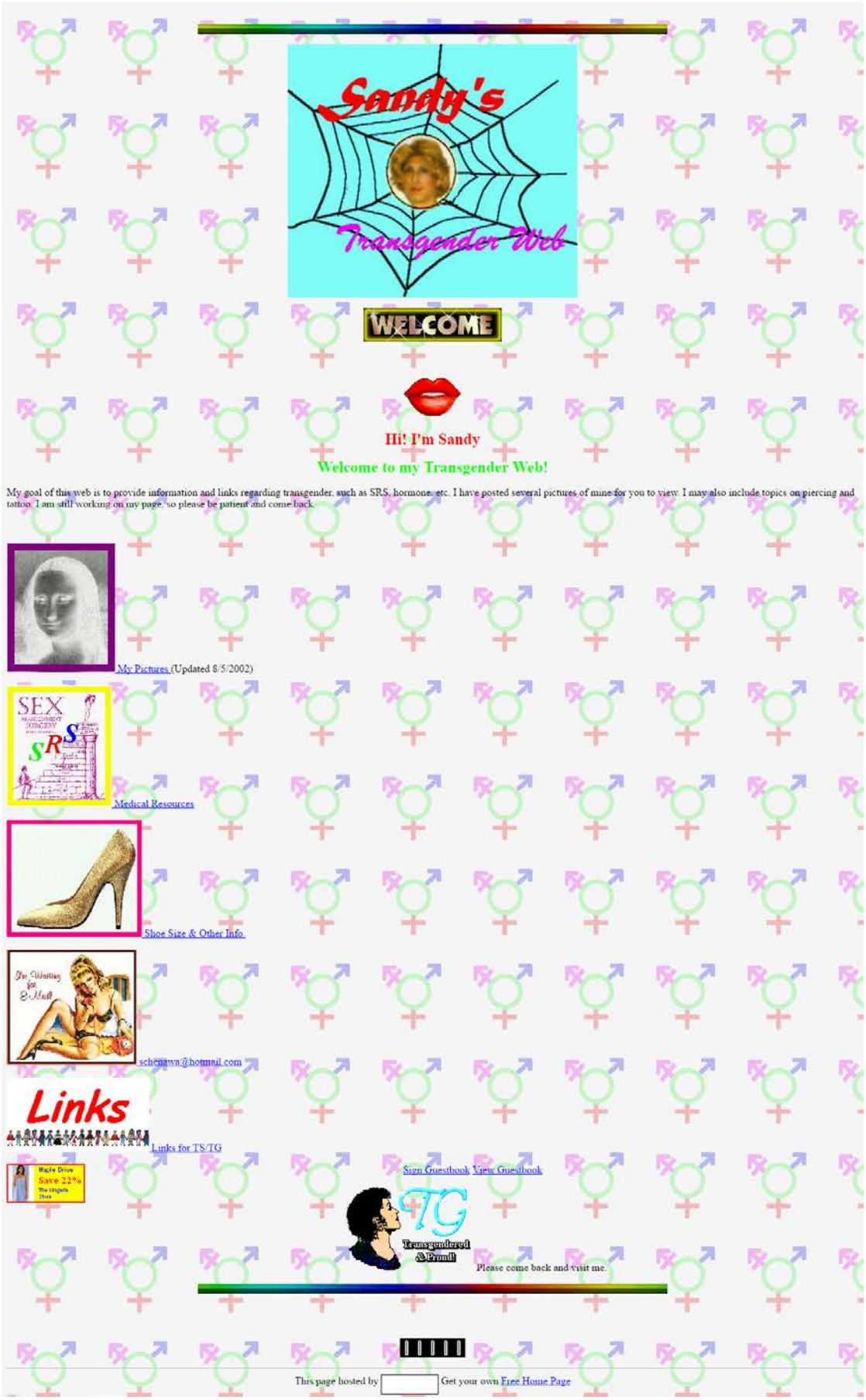


Figure 4.1: A sample transgender homepage, retrieved using Geocities archive GeoCitites.ws. It models the design elements particular to the personal home page, such as animated .GIFS, repeating background images, a guestbook, owner photographs, and a simplistic HTML-only design.

And though such designs have since fallen out of favor, the possibilities of such a graphics-centered medium cannot be understated for a trans population. The graphical freedom of digital images and flexible HTML code also allowed creators to design their sites around their personal aesthetic or gender identity. This could be particularly important for individuals who weren't able to express their gender identity and sense of self in offline venues. In example, the young trans girl who couldn't fill her bedroom with the accoutrements of girlhood for fear of retribution could fill her home page with as many feminine colors and sparkly animated butterfly .GIFs as it could handle.

The trans websites studied here vary widely in their design, but their visual style reflected either a) the dominant style at the moment of their creation or b) an update to an easy-to-use contemporary formats. Designs based on HTML tables or long, single pages full of text—all hallmarks of pre-Web 2.0 design—make up the core infrastructure of several sites. Some of these designs can be time-dated to the software used, as the meta tags reveal owners built their pages using off-the-shelf design software such as Microsoft Frontpage or Adobe PageMill, or used pre-formatted HTML produced elsewhere in 1999. Because such structures are easy to code and replicate, fragments of these copies were left behind in stray tags or uncorrected headers or titles. On The Transitional Male, page design varied across different sections, with pages using the site's different designs and logos from throughout its history. In contrast, sites with a social presence, such as forums or chatrooms, used contemporary open-source content management platforms such as Wordpress or Drupal. Given the number of individuals who might seek out these sites for their social aspects, these updates made the site more approachable to new users familiar with the generic Wordpress-style "columns and tabs" format.

The placement and usage of personal imagery and color scheme also communicated particular meanings upon first encounter. Reflecting the home page's emphasis on personal ownership, multiple sites prominently featured large photographs of the owners at the top of the front page, while sites focused on general information relied on "branded" logos, and included smaller photographs or none at all. In some cases, color scheme was directly related to an owner's gender identity: several sites maintained by trans women prominently featured feminine-associated colors like pink and purple. In their original design, the owners of T-Vox, both trans women, make it a point to note they rejected these connotations, instead adopting a "punk-inspired look" meant to "set [T-Vox] apart from the other, predominantly pink and flowery, trans* websites online in mid-to-late 2005."

T-Vox's owners' rejection of such a "pink and flowery" visual aesthetic mirrors some of my participants' reactions to these sites. In a contemporary web environment, design plays a role equal to the text itself in framing audience perceptions of the information a site contains. [27] As with any genre, visual and structural designs may dominate for a time, acquiring particular temporal connotations—thus the GIF-heavy style is intimately connected in the public consciousness to a period (the mid to late 1990s) and a platform (Geocities). Accessible, navigable, and up-to-date design can also work to offset visitor concerns with owner credibility (Flanagin and Metzger 2007, 334). The older designs of some sites that so repulsed my participants, then, were tied up to their perception of the designs as not credible. Some site owners, recognizing this perception, have clearly tried to offset these reactions through

[27] Interestingly, in Beiriger and Jackson's survey, one respondent requested that the library offer "links to Internet resources, maybe categories or with summaries–like 'sound medical information' or 'unsound advice on hormones' or 'good discussion of how to come out to relatives'. . . to help people find what's out there and to help know how much to 'trust' it or where to start" (Beiriger and Jackson 2007: 55). This suggests that trans individuals themselves may lack the expertise to make sense of trans websites, and instead look for an "information expert," so to speak, such as a librarian to take on this role.

testaments to the site's value. Right under The Transitional Male's header is this qualifier: "Old fashioned looking, yes - nothing fancy, sure- chock full of information, yes!" Others contextualized their basic designs as reflecting a commitment to accessibility. The owner of the eponymous Hudson's FTM Resource Guide emphasizes that his graphic-free and simple design is "easy to load and navigate, no matter with what web browser or from where in the world a person [is] looking at the site," and the pages at TS Roadmap are "kept small so they'll load quickly, even if you have a dial-up modem."[28] Their definition of "accessibility," however, remains at the level of technological limitations. Informational accessibility—accounting for a variety of audience contexts, including race, class, or level of ability—remain unaddressed.

4.3: Owner Ethos

Beyond graphical design, home pages also allowed users to publish a variety of autobiographical narratives and accompanying photographic materials. Photography and the mirror as trope have long played key roles in the trans autobiography, while "before and after" photographs were staples of post-1960s medical texts on transsexuality—the back cover text of the 1966 Ace Publishing edition of *The Transsexual Phenomenon* breathlessly teases the inclusion of "unretouched photographs of the actual transsexuals—taken before, during, and after treatment and surgery!" However, photography of transsexual subjects "[is] situated in a tension between revealing and concealing transsexuality," "[demanding] that we concede that transsexuality makes a thorough difference to the body and yet—part of the autobiography—that we discover consistent and continuous identity in the very place of alterity" (Prosser 1998, 209, 213). While non-trans authored photography risks "[incarnating] a 'dead' self that one is not,"

[28] Part of James's commitment to accessibility includes using no "Java / JavaScripts." However, her use of Google Ads and Analytics, in order to promote her own business, ironically necessitates the use of Javascript.

(Prosser 1998, 218) or the unwilling re-insertion of the trans subject into past contexts, self-authored and organized photography claims the journey of transition as personal and unique—an ongoing process catalogued through the eye of the individual experiencing it.

Digital technologies lowered barriers to publication and dissemination of such photographs drastically—though the initial access barrier would remain formidable for many years. As noted in Chapter 1, early relay services like Cross Connections used their photographic collections as a selling point to prospective subscribers. Being able to post photographs and catalogue one's 'true' self online would be a central appeal of a homepage for trans users. With the home page, users could do more than merely share photographs: they could document and present their whole lives online in the ways they wanted, outside of existing narratives. We can see this effect in the participant's reaction to the photo of ftmtransition.com owner Ethan Daniel eating soup described in Chapter 3. The unremarkable nature of his appearance put him, in the participant's view, beyond Prosser's "tension between revealing and concealing transsexuality." Instead, Daniel was able to present himself in a way that transcended this tension to claim his body as just a "guy," outside of his transgender status.

This same documentary impulse is evident in my sample. All of the sites contained some element of the owner's self-narrative, from at least one brief biographical sketch up to much more detailed narratives. Lynn Conway's Homepage had the longest of these, an extended biographical narrative spanning multiple chapters. Such long form narratives in particular embodied the home page era's conventions, emphasizing the arc of the owner's transgender identity development, often culminating in the creation of their website. Owner photographs could also be used alongside or as a supplement to these biographies. On some sites, such as The Transgender Support Site, a photograph of the owner was featured prominently on the frontpage,

while others included images next to specific biographical sketches. No matter their location, all of these images reinforce the owner's own understanding of themselves as a well-adjusted, successful individual.

These narratives also had specific rhetorical and discursive purposes. First, they established the owner's persuasive ethos, giving them—and by extension, any information and advice they offer—authenticity, authority, and credibility as trans experts. Second, it opened up avenues of reader identification around shared experiences. Lastly, it connected the site owners' self-identities as public trans individuals to their identities as website owners, which some embedded within their site's very name: Laura's Playground, Susan's Place, Hudson's FTM Guide. Owners' continued maintenance of their websites was presented as central to and supportive of their current personal success. Through their websites, owners are deeply invested in helping their audience thrive—in making sure, to use a popular phrase, "it gets better" for readers, particularly trans youth. Lori, owner of TG.Guide.com, says the site is a "labor of love," and her goal is "that nobody will ever have to feel so isolated and alone as we did back in the days prior to the Worldwide Web." Dailey's IAmTransgender.com arose from a lack of existing appropriate resources after she came out to her mother, and one of her site's key goals is "to explain things to my mom - and yours, for that matter." For Laura Amato, the owner of Laura's Playground, her self-stated "primary purpose…was to run this site and support other people like me. Creating a Transgender Community here not only shows people they are not alone but that there are thousands who have beaten this." Not unlike a home page, these sites serve as an extension of the owner's identity online, an embodiment of their desire to help others.

4.4: Interpretive Framing: Historical Contextualization

Some authors also used biography to locate their site, and by extension themselves, within existing knowledge lineages. Both James and Hudson compared their sites to earlier print materials, drawing on these publications' cultural contexts to frame how readers interpret the information on their sites. TS Roadmap, according to James, was initially inspired by her desire in 1996 to create "a transsexual version of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*." Like the landmark feminist text, the site would offer an alternative to dehumanizing medical texts, instead focusing on social and medical information for trans women written by trans women. James also dedicated TS Roadmap to "two pioneers in transgender online resources," Melanie Anne Phillips and Gwendolyn Ann Smith, who founded the AOL Transgender Community Forums, an early social support site James used extensively. With TS Roadmap, she could "only hope I can come close to emulating these two amazing women with this site."

In describing his inspiration to create his eponymous FTM Resource Guide, Hudson evocatively described his first encounter with Sullivan's *Information for the Female to Male Cross Dresser and Transsexual*. Not unlike my encounter with Benjamin's landmark text, Hudson first encountered the book at a used bookstore and "snapped it up." What he loves about the text, he said, is how it covers a variety of trans-relevant topics in "a matter-of-fact, even, accessible tone." The text, to him, carried "the wonderful grassroots feeling of trans guys sharing information amongst ourselves, without judgment or reservation…When I first read through it, I thought to myself, 'I wish there was something like this readily available today, updated with the latest information and resources'." Hudson's guide was inspired by the spirit of Sullivan's text, to be a place where "a reader could get a solid, detailed introduction to any topic listed here, as well as find links to where they could learn more." The site's tone would be "accessible and

welcoming, like Sullivan's book, so that no matter what the identity of the reader, their stage in transition, or their knowledge of FTM issues, they would be able to walk away with useful, non-judgmental information."

These claims differ slightly from those premised on personal experience, as one might find on a home page. Instead, these owners framed their sites through a kind of mental equivalency—this site is meant to be understood like this existing object. Therefore, it must also necessarily share the existing object's best qualities, such as accessibility, accuracy, and neutrality. Hudson's presentation in particular invokes the affective pull of idealized community, such as when he imagines an environment of judgment-free sharing amongst a non-specific mass of "trans guys." This move also obscures the way authorial voice or perspective emerges in site content. For while *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is produced by the many perspectives that make up the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, TS Roadmap contained only James's perspective and those she chooses to endorse through publication—a choice which colors the content of her site's information.

4.5: Interpretive Framing: Spatial Contextualization

The home page, as a concept, was inherently spatial from its outset. Free hosting services' publicity materials deliberately fostered home page creators' sense of spatial settlement and ownership over their sites. AOL named their web-hosting service "Hometown," while Geocities initially allowed users—dubbed "homesteaders" in distinctly colonialist company rhetoric—to organize in themed "neighborhoods" where they were assigned a specific "street address." Mirroring offline geography, LGBT-related pages were located in WestHollywood, a well-known gay city and tourist destination in Los Angeles County. Though I was a bit younger than Lacher's imagined website designer, I remember making my first website in the mid-

1990s—one of many I would start and abandon over the next ten years. Constructed using Microsoft Frontpage and hosted on Tripod, it embodied the worst design clichés of the era. Yet I fondly, if dimly, remember the pride and investment I took in these sites as my personal spaces, my "homes" online.

Such spatial metaphors persist in the sites studied here. For several, it starts at the level of name. Susan's Place is, quite literally, someone's place. The site's tagline, "We Stand at the Crossroads of Gender, Balanced on the Sharp Edge of a Knife," positions the trans individual in at the center of two (or more) oppositional forces, which could cut deeply with one wrong step—a mistake Susan's Place can help you avoid. In contrast, Laura's Playground uses the playground to symbolize a safe space, where users who are "starting over" not unlike a child going through puberty can safely "[explore] the gender we feel that we truely [sic] are inside." In contrast, sites the TGGuide, Hudson's FTM Guide and TS Roadmap, use cartographic metaphors in their names or rhetorical framing to encourage readers to use their sites as guides on their transition journey. TS Roadmap's logo takes this a step further, using an iconographic combination of a four-point compass and the transgender symbol (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2: TS Roadmap's logo.

James frames readers' experience in terms of a personal journey, to which TS Roadmap maps out "shortcuts that can often make things easier," no matter the road one takes. James positions the site as a collective map-making project, not unlike explorers' early maps: "it won't have everything right the first time; some items may be a bit distorted, and there may be blank spots here and there. But with everyone's help, it will become more and more accurate."

4.6: Site Content

During their heyday, trans home pages frequently came in two varieties: either a repository of advice for possible trans readers or a transition journal, in which the owner tracked the changes experienced during transition (Surkan 2003, 258-260). The pages studied here primarily focus on providing information and advice, though a few (Lynn Conway's Homepage and Ethan Daniel's ftmtransition.com) do include some personal journals. While sites may deploy different framing metaphors, presentation of site purpose was consistent across all of the sites studied. All the site owners, in different ways, presented their sites as a "community resource" for visitors. This "resources" focus could be reinforced in the website's name or subhead, or detailed in descriptive text and links on the front page.

Sites' content covered a variety of issues relevant to trans populations, but for many the primary focus was on information related to social and medical transition. Authorship varied across sites: some sites, like Susan's Place and TGGuide.com, primarily offered content contributed by users, while others, such as TS-Roadmap and Hudson's FTM Resource Guide were almost entirely composed by the site's owner. Authorship of T-Vox's content was difficult to determine; when the site moved from a wiki to a Wordpress-based site, the wiki content was largely copied over in its entirety, including the in-page links and formatting—obscuring the original authors. Owner-authored sites were also more likely to include content of broader subcultural interest, such as discussion of gender dysphoria's causes or the author's views on gender norms or transgender politics. Table 4.2 is a listing of the broad categories of types of information and specific examples.

Content Type	Selected Examples of Content
Definitions and Terminology	• Glossary of Terms • "How to Tell If You Are Transgendered"

Gender Presentation	• Grooming advice, including:
	  o Shaving
	  o Skincare
	  o Makeup
	• Clothing advice

Interpersonal Relationships	• Coming Out to spouses/relatives • Renegotiating marriage • Sexual intimacy as a trans person
Medical Information	• Description of hormones and treatment • Description of surgical procedures • Lists of trans-friendly medical professionals
Legal Information	• Birth Certificate Changes • Marriage Licenses and Divorces
Political/Opinion Columns	• Passing and Stealth as political actions • Pathologization of trans people by medical authorities • Gender stereotyping in children
Personal Information	• Owner Biography • Transition Journal
Beyond The Site	• Support Group Directory • Recommended Links • Recommended Media, such as films or books

Table 4.2: Content Types and Examples

When presenting site content, authors took a variety of tones. Some owners were consistently focused on being neutral or informative, emphasizing the content's "factual" nature. This may also arise from owners' professional background: both Hudson and Lynn Conway comfortably deployed scientific terminology and phrasings in their descriptions of scientific studies or the effect of hormones on the body where other authors offered short, general summaries or links to writing by medical or scientific authorities. When presenting social or cultural content, in contrast, some owners would take the tone of an approachable confidant, as when Dailey advised her readers against adopting a "monochromatic" wardrobe: "Grey suits with white shirts are such a guy thing. Girl, you need color!" In these moments, authors could

strategically deploy gender stereotypes to create a sense of intimacy, as Transitional Male owner Nick Edwards does in his advice on one's first therapy visit: "stay away [from] frills specifically jewelry, too many rings, ear rings (though men wear them). It won't hurt to leave the glitter at home once every week."

These examples of authorial voice and embedded ideology highlight just how amorphous and non-specific the term "resources" is. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "resource" as "a means of supplying a deficiency or need; something that is a source of help, information, strength, etc" (OED). This definition raises further questions, however. Are resources meant to be a compendium of objective information, or to place an emphasis on helping through advice? Can something be a resource if it only meets a certain portion of the population's needs? And most important, can resources be ideological? The latter half of this section will attempt to address these questions in two arenas: owners' assertions to objectivity, and owners' imagined audience for their websites.

4.6.1: The Objectivity Question: Point of View and the Status of "Facts"

A key problem in differentiating information, opinion, and advice was the juxtaposition of generalized, presumably "commonplace" knowledge, use of second personal plural, and inconsistent or missing citations. On identity-related topics, such as subcultural terminology glossaries, authors would remind readers that the content was not definitive, but a starting point. Hudson prefaced his glossary as "one possible starting point toward knowledge and understanding of trans men's issues," and for visitors "the best way to learn is to be inquisitive, respectful, and to keep an open mind." Yet in discussions of gender performance and passing—a controversial term referring to being recognized by others as their identified (often binary) gender—gendered behaviors were presented as objective "facts of life," so to speak. Pages were

identified in title as having advice or "tips," but the page text relied on broad generalizations as the premise for the "tip," reinforcing the behavior the tip reacts to. Authors talked about how "many" women did one thing, or the "vast majority of men" did another thing. Behaviors, dress, and haircuts were presented as self-evidently "masculine" and "feminine," and rarely do authors socially or culturally contextualize this information. In example, Edwards advised readers on his page of Men's Room Tips that "men drop their trousers all the way to the floor around their feet. I know it's pretty gross down there the majority of the time, but that's what guys do when they sit to do their business." In Nick's presentation, a mass of unspecified "guys" did this, and to be accepted or fit in the reader must also drop trou, so to speak.

Thus, socially contextual gendered practices or behaviors take on the character of objective fact: Men do this, women do that, and in order to "pass," you should be prepared to do this as well—or not enter the space, lest you put your safety at risk.[29] Gender is treated, moreover, as a race-blind, class-blind concept, with white norms standing in for all forms of gender presentation. This was particularly notable in white owners' skincare and makeup-related content, which were geared primarily to women with similar skin tones. Through some owners qualified their information as limited in its applicability, they didn't also offer alternative resources for those with other skin tones or types. This reinforcement of whiteness as dominant is in some cases further exacerbated by the choice of imagery to accompany the information, which is either photographs of white, middle-class individuals or iconographic representations

[29] Though much of this advice is given in service of passing, some owners criticize "passing" as a term and its underlying connotations of deception, using alternatives such as "presenting" or "being accepted as male/female." However, the switch in terminology does not address the central contradiction: Because the behaviors are presented as objective prerequisites for acceptance as one's identified gender, addressing or challenging the underlying issues around gender inequality and stereotyping is impossible. To use the old adage, one must go along to get along and have their gender identity accepted by the world at large.

whose lack of differentiated features suggests whiteness through omission—whiteness as background norm.

The unchallenged stability of sex and gender also underlaid owners' use of scientific discourse, particularly when discussing the "causes" of trans identity. Some owners, like Lori and Ethan Daniel, didn't address the question at all, while others, like James and Hudson, didn't attempt to neatly resolve the question; Hudson noted that "the truth is that we simply do not know for certain why some people are transgender or transsexual." Even so, multiple owners deploy the supposed objectivity and authority of "scientific fact" to "prove" that transness is a "birth defect" for which transition and medical intervention is the "cure." In all of these cases, authors cite "scientific evidence" of how babies develop "male" or "female" brains in utero due to hormonal shifts, this explaining how one's genetic makeup and gender identity can be at odds. In her highly detailed description of these studies, Conway notes that these studies are to "the science of gender much like the Galileo's observations of the moons of Jupiter…dramatic, unprecedented, undeniable observations that shift the previous paradigm of thought." This shift, then, reflects a nature-first paradigm which prevented further debate and removed responsibility, so to speak, from both the trans person and their parents. Edwards's page on "Accepting Your TS/TG Child," co-written with his mother, offered an excellent example of this rhetorical move. In it, they described the scientific evidence for transness, including a study where trans women are found to have "the brain of a female" based on "a section of the hypothalamus." However, parents should not hold themselves to blame, as "a child born with genital malformations is no more your fault or less credible than a female child who later wishes to transition to male or male child who later wishes to transition to female!" But parents are responsible for accepting their child's genetic imperfections, lest their child is driven to depression and suicide from lack of

support. Rhetorically, parents are placed between two immovable forces: biological reality, backed by science, and an inevitable risk of death.

In other cases, authors presented certain behaviors or assumptions as irrefutable fact without citation, using only their personal experience and trans status to support their assertions. On a page entitled, "How To Tell If You Are Transgendered," Melanie Anne Phillips assured readers that

> I can tell you for a fact that a little known secret is that many 'true' transsexuals who started out men but whose minds are totally female still get turned on by wearing women's clothes everyday, even decades after having sex reassignment surgery.

In a similar passage on the "Male to Female MTF Transsexual" page of Laura's Playground, Laura Amato began her introductory paragraph describing several common stereotypes around trans women then said, "the fact is nothing [referring to the stereotypes] could be further from the truth. Transsexuals are People who were born with a female mind and soul and a male body that doesn't match. It is a birth defect, not a lifestyle choice…The truth is on these pages. Nothing more." In both of these cases, owners' appeals to unassailable "facts" circumscribed challenge from readers who would consider the trans individual as out-of-step with "objective" reality. But it also established an alternate objective reality where only the author's perspective on trans individuals as a class can be correct—when in reality there is a diverse variety of options amongst trans individuals on these topics.

4.7: Site Audience

While the home page is often perceived to be a static invention, Megan Ankerson argues this dichotomy represents a false division between the supposed "read-only" and the "social web" (2015). Instead, the social web on home pages comes through "modes of address," as

authors shift "from one that prioritizes a social imagination of indefinite strangers, to one that vacillates between imagined strangers and numerable, identifiable, individuals" (2015, 11). On these sites, owners regularly offered broad descriptions of their audience on their front pages: "women in transition" (TS Roadmap), "transgender, intersex, genderqueer/non-binary, and gender questioning people; their friends; and their families," (TVox.com), or the "transgender community" at large (TGGuide.com). Such descriptions, particularly "community," allowed some room for visitors to self-define as audience members: after all, depending on one's definition, many individuals would qualify to be community members. In other places, owners located themselves within their audience, reinforcing a sense of shared experience. In these moments, owners occupied the position of a fellow trans person, generalizing experiences across individuals while simultaneously interpolating the reader into a shared "us." Discussing "Transgender Voice Training" on the front page of TGGuide.com, Lori noted that "a passing voice is one of the most common problems encountered by *virtually everyone* on the transgender continuum, especially male to female trans people. *Many of us* have given up out of frustration because *we* believe *we* can't develop a passable feminine voice" (Emphasis mine). This statement and similar ones discursively construct a category, "us," to which the reader can find comfort in belonging. Modifiers "many" and "most" alongside first-person plural "we" and "us" suggest a broader shared experience amongst a generalized population. In American English, the inclusive "we," Schiebman finds, "[mediates] inclusion of other participants" through "the use of modal elements or through presentation of opinions as commonly shared (people like us)" (2014, 24). Those who do not share these experiences are implicitly excluded, the unrecognized few to the "many" who face these issues and seek help.

These two examples represent the broadest attempts to form a sense of shared collectivity amongst visitors. Yet in some owners' content, this collective acquired specific characteristics central to the dominant images of the trans subject as a good, neoliberal citizen: white, middle-class, heterosexual trans individuals who seek some form of social or medical transition and then successful acceptance into "mainstream" life. This trans subject is also a good consumer, buying the right products and services required to acquire broader "acceptance."[30] This "proper trans subject," in neoliberal terms, is one who "can contribute to their nation's advancement in the global political economy" and has the "entrepreneurial spirit" necessary to "to make adjustments and sacrifices to provide for their own material needs, as well as for those of their family and communities" (Irving 2008, 39, 52). The persistent presence of this idealized subject informed visitors' understandings of who trans people are and what they look like—setting tight boundaries around the trans imaginary. [31]

Sites represented the good trans subject to greater or lesser degrees based on their level of generalized information. In example: of the three sites specifically for trans men, Daniel's ftmtransition.com focused entirely on his process and emphasized him as sole subject, while The Transitional Male or Hudson's FTM Resource Guide focused on offering gender "information"

[30] This emphasis on consumerism is complicated by the fact three owners, Andrea James of TS Roadmap, Melanie Phillips of Transgender Support Site, and Nick Edwards of Transitional Male sold trans-related products on the front page of their site, in sidebar banners on every page, or at different spots in-text. These owners draw on existing consumerist ideology, where purchasing the product with resolve a real or perceived problem, to sell products to a possible vulnerable population. James in particular strategically links to materials on applicable pages, advertising them as an "expansion" of the advice she offers for free. Owners' promotion of these products raises serious questions about their commercial investment in promoting their products compared to their personal motivations for maintaining their sites.

[31] This is not to, as Siebler (2012) does, position those trans persons who do engage in consumerist practices or adopt binary gender presentations as adherents to a rigid transgender norm or dupes of a capitalist culture that has "successfully convinced transgender people that they must purchase surgeries and hormones, body parts or the removal of them, to embody their 'true' identity" (2012, 96). Instead, I critique owners' framing of the "good citizen" trans subject as the only avenue for successful subjecthood. Siebler may find that "even transgender people are no longer queering gender in the way that Dr. Frank-n-Furter did in the 1970s," but I would argue queerness can come in many forms, not all of them immediately visible (2012, 96).

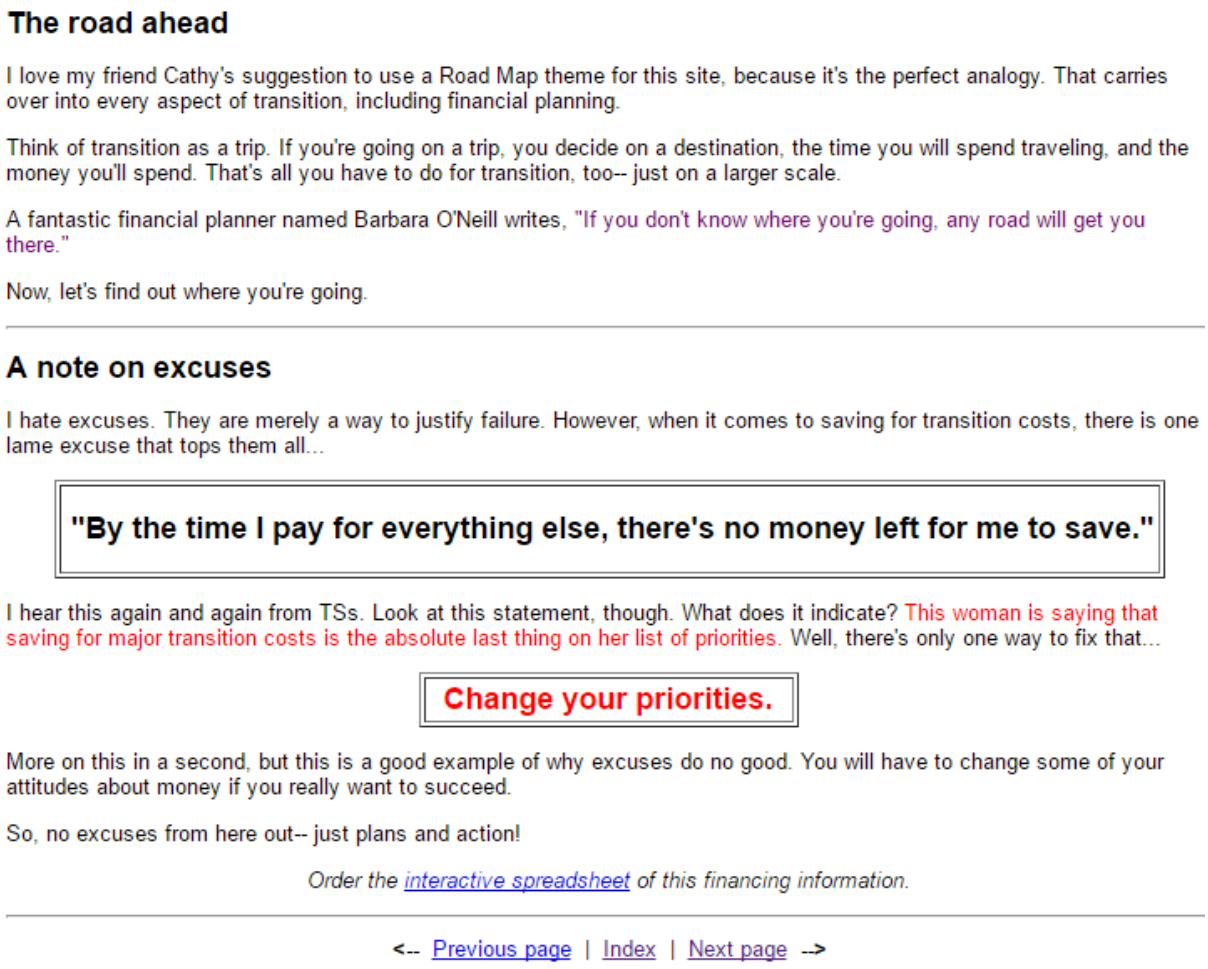
which partially reproduced this subject in different ways. As noted earlier, white norms dominated as the context for owners' understanding of gender presentation and norms. In his discussion of barber shops, Hudson's presented the barbershop as a generic location which offers one service but varies in character from shop to shop. However, his advice can't encompass the differing regional, racial, and cultural meanings barber shops take on in specific locations. Instead, he targeted his information at an imagined consumer who, when presented with a variety of options, can move amongst them and navigate with ease—thus, a socially mobile, middle-class, likely white consumer. James made it a point to warn "young readers" that changing legal documents were essential "to live a quiet happy life in mainstream society." As cautionary tales, she pointed to the cases of Gwen Araujo and Angie Zapata, whose birth names were used in press reports following their deaths. The press used these names, she argued, because "they had not taken steps to change their names." Given this, "an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure in this case…You'll thank me later!" In this move, James blamed Araujo and Zapata—whose status as Latina trans women goes unacknowledged by James—for their own mis-naming, with no acknowledgement of the particular structural or economic barriers Latina/o trans people may face.

Gender, race, and class were also entwined in representations of proper trans femininity and trans women in other moments. Class was signaled in two ways: assumptions of economic means and judgment surrounding class 'signifiers'. The most immediate assumptions of economic means came through preferred makeup items or items of clothing. Some sites' recommended skincare and beauty products were available exclusively from specialty shops or priced on-site as between $20 to $40 dollars. The assumption such prices are "worth it" ignored both working class monetary constraints and the extra financial burden trans women of color

may face in accessing and purchasing products appropriate to their skin tone or hair texture. Alternately, certain features of femininity are marked by owners as negatively signifying class. Long nails, James cautioned in her advice on makeup, "can be cool, or they can be very declasse…Express yourself as you wish, but if your goal is to be accepted as female, ease up on the nail color and length." Similarly, names could act as negative class signals and prevent "assimilation" into society, as "TGs and strippers often gravitate toward similar naming patterns [that] seem to do with notions of hyperfeminine glamor and skew toward certain socioeconomic groups"—in this case, lower socioeconomic groups. Elsewhere, James framed privilege as "luck" and presented acceptance as a "trickle-down process:"

> "As with any civil rights movement, some TG people will have to wait to get the acceptance currently enjoyed by those who can assimilate. Does that suck? Yes. But the sad truth is this: right now, it is more likely that someone who can assimilate into mainstream society will be able to enjoy the privileges of mainstream society. Does that make them better? No. Just luckier. Right place, right time."

For “unlucky” individuals, then, they must deploy their “entrepreneurial spirit” to make up for their social position and achieve acceptance. James’s Financial Workbook, in particular, was a compelling example of the good trans subject in action. I’ve included the first page of the workbook below (Figure 4.3) to illustrate the visual, alongside the textual, rhetoric James employed. Her 36-page guide (with an accompanying Excel spreadsheet that can be purchased for only $6.99(!), advertised at the bottom of Figure 4.3) offered a variety of advice on ways to “afford your transition.” Her “note on excuses” is a model example of “entrepreneurial spirit” in action. The trans visitor cannot look to James for support, because any response they have will be an excuse that, as she



The road ahead

I love my friend Cathy's suggestion to use a Road Map theme for this site, because it's the perfect analogy. That carries over into every aspect of transition, including financial planning.

Think of transition as a trip. If you're going on a trip, you decide on a destination, the time you will spend traveling, and the money you'll spend. That's all you have to do for transition, too-- just on a larger scale.

A fantastic financial planner named Barbara O'Neill writes, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there."

Now, let's find out where you're going.

A note on excuses

I hate excuses. They are merely a way to justify failure. However, when it comes to saving for transition costs, there is one lame excuse that tops them all...

"By the time I pay for everything else, there's no money left for me to save."

I hear this again and again from TSs. Look at this statement, though. What does it indicate? This woman is saying that saving for major transition costs is the absolute last thing on her list of priorities. Well, there's only one way to fix that...

Change your priorities.

More on this in a second, but this is a good example of why excuses do no good. You will have to change some of your attitudes about money if you really want to succeed.

So, no excuses from here out-- just plans and action!

Order the interactive spreadsheet of this financing information.

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Figure 4.3: The first page of James’s “Financing transition” workbook on TS Roadmap.

says, serves to "justify failure." The trans woman's inability to afford transition is an indication of her failure to have the right priorities. These include, in James' advice throughout the following pages: to prepare for their employment to be affected, because "it sucks that things are this way, but here's a reality check: unpassable TSs face greater discrimination in the workplace;" to think of one's money in "zap units," equivalent to so many hours of electrolysis treatments; or to shift to walking or biking for errands or commuting, a method by which James "saved $1,200 in two years…That's a trachea shave!" None of these examples took into account the structural inequalities which make such advice difficult to follow: greater unemployment amongst and workplace discrimination against people of color, working class financial precarity, or barriers to mobility or access faced by disabled individuals. In all of these cases, the trans individual who performs responsible spending was a "good trans subject" who doesn't justify their failure but achieved success through proper "entrepreneurial spirit."

4.7.1: Respectability Politics and the "Good Trans Subject"

Failure to be a "good trans subject," then, marked one as not being in the site's target audience—or even as a legitimate claimant of trans identity. These moments of differentiation or exclusion set up two categories: proper "trans subjects" who added to the overall community and aberrant subjects, who couldn't claim or didn't deserve the resources the site offered. In this differentiation, owners embrace what I term "transgender respectability politics," emphasizing personal responsibility and "respectable" gender presentation as the only desirable future for trans individuals. Only a few owners acted as gatekeepers and overly engaged in respectability politics, but those who did presented a striking picture of what the "deserving" subject looks like.

In her description of trans lives, Lynn Conway is careful to differentiate between middle-class trans women and "street trannies," individuals who live in urban spaces, can't gain access to SRS, and are thus cut off from a full transition into womanhood. To be a "tranny," as Conway put it, is to be forever marked as an Other. To be visually marked as possibly aberrant was equally troubling. In describing a woman pre-facial feminization surgery (FFS), Conway noted she "still has a 'tranny appearance,'" with a "protruding brow ridge, the tall chin and the widely flared jawbone." Post FFS, she was "a strikingly beautiful woman, even without any makeup on."

Both Conway and James also designate the undeserving as "fake transseuxals" (James) or "support group rejects" or "failures" (James and Conway). James cast the Internet at large as a highly unsafe environment for trans individuals, particularly those who are young or newly out. She discouraged interaction online except for her site and the sites or forums of a select number of trans women James approved of. She designated a whole section of her site to exposing "fakes," including a seven-page collection of images of fakes and links to (now nonexistent) homepages. These individuals were, in James's description, either pretending to be trans women online for attention, erotic reasons, or they were "wannabes," "tranny-chaser[s] who [want] to be just like a transsexual." A true transsexual will always "seek to bring their minds and bodies into congruence," and anyone who claims otherwise has ulterior motives. Central to James's contention with "wannabes" in particular is their support for Ray Blanchard's theory of *autogynephilia,* or the tendency for a man to become aroused by the thought or image of himself as a woman—embodied online by the practice of Photoshopping one's face onto photographs of glamorous or famous women. The concept was endorsed in J. Michael Bailey's 2003 book *The Man Who Would Be Queen*, which sparked significant controversy after its publication.

Conway also targeted such “wannabes,” though she made no reference to Blanchard’s theory or Bailey’s text in relation to them.[32] In a paragraph under the header “Others,” she describes those who “mingle in among the transgender community but who aren't easily ‘classified’ as, or recognized as, being transgender.” This group, the “underachievers,” are “a very difficult group to sort out and to help,” as they can often be found “presenting as ‘victims’” and “[throwing] themselves onto the clinics and welfare systems pleading for help.” According to Conway,

> [U]nfortunately, such dependent people make very poor candidates for gender transition, since they lack the problem-solving abilities and personal development skills to handle such a complex project, independent of whether such a project makes any sense for them. Lacking clear-cut female gender identities, their transition attempts usually fail disastrously, resulting in further social marginalization. These "underachievers" often haunt the edges of many TG/TS support groups, where they may remain for years (and their visible presence in support groups often frightens young transitioners from approaching such groups). These are sad cases for which there are now no ready solutions.

Like the trans woman whose “failure” to transition is her fault, the “underachiever” is a failure due to their lack of “development,” no doubt abetted by their reliance on welfare instead of a focus on developing the personal entrepreneurial skills modeled in James’s financial workbook. Their non-normative gender presentation further marginalizes them and marks them as not respectable subjects. In Conway’s evocative terms, one imagines these individuals as disfigured nightmares, lurking in halls outside support groups waiting for unsuspecting victims to pounce upon.

Similar sentiments about those who are not truly “committed” to transition, respectability, and a binary gender identity were found on pages related to the Big Brothers

[32] However, Conway does devote a sizable section of her site to her writings on the failures of Blanchard, Bailey, and *autogynephilia*.

Binders program, a chest binder donation program run in part by Nick Edwards and hosted on Transitional Male. In its requirements and associated pages, the program set out a specific definition of both “trans men” and “need,” requiring applicants to perform trans respectability for the owners in order to be considered for help. The program description notes that, “although controversial,” the form was only for trans men “who truly identify as male, who wish to or are currently undergoing Hormone Replacement Therapy, Plan to have a Double Mastectomy with Chest Reconstruction and plan to live or are currently living as male full-time.” Applicants must also reiterate this information on their applications, affirm their “proper” use of the binder, as well as outlining why they cannot afford a binder. Those who should not apply, in contrast, include:

- Able bodied Transmen/TransYoungmen, who can work but choose not to
- Trans-youngmen or Transboys under 18 without a parent contacting us
- Those who use programs like this when they truly do not need it
- Lesbian/Butch women who have no desire to fully commit to transitioning to male, those who wish to compress their breasts to "pass" as men when it is convenient or advantageous. we will not debate this

These qualifications set up two different categories of “failed” applicants: the program ‘abuser,’ who takes things for their own advancement when they are not in “need”; and the aberrant trans subject, who does no “commit” to transition but merely wishes to ride on masculinity’s coat-tails. Both of these individuals take away resources from deserving, respectable subjects, who seek a respectable trans existence through medical intervention.

4.8: The Home Page Generation

In Chapter 3, I discussed the transgender “generation gap” online between younger and older trans-identified folks online. Though that section largely focused on differences encountered through platform preference, I would argue the gap concept applies here as well.

Though owner's age is not always clear, many of them and their sites would qualify as members of an "older" generation. Some, like Lori of TGGuide, reference transitioning before the internet was widely available. Based on the James's site dedication, she transitioned in the early to mid-1990s; the AOL Transgender Community Forum was, based on varying sources, was founded in either 1991 or 1993 (depending on the source) and remained active until 1999 (Smith 2016). Conway has the oldest trans history by far: one of Dr. Harry Benjamin's patients in the late 1960s, she transitioned and lived "stealth" until she began to publicly talk about her trans identity in the early 1990s.[33] For some owners, their site's age and longevity is a point of pride or legitimacy. Phillips, whose trans internet history begins on AOL, boasts that the Transgender Support Site is "the world's first transgender support web site - established 1994." In a similar vein, Nick positions Transitional Male, founded in 1998, as "one of the 2 oldest original existing sites left on the internet for Transmen."

Sites' age marks them as emerging during the "first generation" of formats, and their content, over time, comes to reflect their age. Nowhere is this clearer than in the terminology owners use to describe transgender identity. Their choices serve as a sort of subcultural "timestamp," marking the moment when page was written. Though now "transgender" or "trans" has been widely adopted as the umbrella term of choice, individuals of all identities fiercely debated both the definition of the term and its use as an umbrella identity throughout the 1990s.

[33] Conway herself is an interesting figure. While she did work for IBM prior to her transition, she is best known for her work while at Xerox PARC on innovative microchip design methods, which emphasized design's social aspects (Streeter 2011, 98). This work, in part, led her to being recruited in 1982 to DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, which oversaw development of ARAPANET, the Internet's predecessor. In contrast to traditional military-industrial complex thinking, Conway focused on computers as horizontal communication tools and the opportunity of computer networks to promote collaboration (Streeter 2011, 101). Conway's interpretation of her own transition takes some distinctly binary dimensions: As she describes it, transition provided not only mental comfort but an increase in her technical and social skills. After living as female for an extended period, Conway says she "began to sense that [her] mental powers had greatly expanded in important new dimensions," making her "just ever so much more imaginative and creative than before transition, with "vastly improved capabilities at visualizing and mentally simulating complex social interactions."

These debates are the underlying context of much of the discourse studied in Chapter 2. Thus, an owner's choice to use primarily *transsexual* or *TS, transgender*, *TG*, or *trans*, or attempt to join terms with a slash (such as *TS/TG*) signaled their awareness of this ongoing discussion—and in some cases, the particular position they had taken. Only the most recently founded site, T-Vox, universally used the inclusive neologism *trans**. A similar shift can be seen for gender-diverse terminology, as older sites use *androgyne* and more modern sites exclusively use *genderqueer*. Interestingly, only T-Vox regularly used the term *cisgender*; as noted in Chapter 2, TS Roadmap instead marks it as a "rare" and "obscure" term.

For owners who clearly differentiated between "transsexual" and "transgender," transgender was presented as an ideologically loaded term marking a category of individuals focused on social as opposed to medical transition. Some owners positioned transgender individuals as a step beyond cross-dressers, a usage which reinforced existing notions of a "trans hierarchy," where individuals who have medically transitioned and can live "stealth" (keeping their trans status concealed) are at the top, with those who cannot or do not wish to medically transition are at the bottom (Cromwell 1999). "Transgender as umbrella" was an attempt to dismantle (or at least de-prioritize) this hierarchy, but this ideology remains embedded in these sites despite the contemporary political climate.

In Chapter 3, my genderqueer participant wondered if message boards (and, presumably, the sites on which they are hosted) were "timeless enough to be useful five to ten years out" or if things will have "changed so quickly that you don't need to go online and search about all this stuff because it will have already have passed people." Though I cannot provide an answer to their question, I would argue that the determination of "timelessness" must be determined by

examining not only sites' content, but the medium through which they are most often encountered: the search engine results page.

4.9: Sites Outside of Time

As alluded to in my discussion of terminology**,** the information on these pages and others ages quickly, particularly in a moment of rapid change in insurance coverage mandates and legal protections. Many sites have unclear or sparse update notifications or go long periods without clear updates—as of this writing in 2016, Hudson's FTM Resource Guide's last two updates came a year apart in June 2015 and July 2016. Every site had at least one dead link, going to sites or pages that no longer exist. Provider and support group listings were equally at risk of aging beyond usefulness, as providers or groups change names, move from one web address to another, or retire or disband. Because these listings are based on submissions from practitioners or group participants, the owner relies on these visitors to offer updated information. Beyond inaccuracies, as site material ages, it can also become out of step with more contemporary concerns. Even though many websites have emerged since she first published TS Roadmap, James has not sought out new resources, instead replacing dead links with links to archival versions hosted in the Internet Archive. In so doing, her information becomes infinitely time-locked, focused on topics and concerns out of step with contemporary transgender discourse. Several trans women have offered thoughtful critiques of James' site, TS Roadmap, and her transition-related company Deep Stealth Productions for their emphasis on "passing" and respectability (Reed 2012; MHz 2014).

Yet these sites' persistence is aided, in part, by the search algorithm. Search algorithms are selective in both inclusion and hierarchy of appearance, as certain content is promoted or demoted in search results based on algorithmic judgments of inclusion or relevance. Such

judgment is founded in a "particular *knowledge logic*…built on specific presumptions about what knowledge is and how one should identify its most relevant components" (Gillespie 2014, 168; emphasis author's). Often, relevance is based not only on search-term incidence but also contextual site information and number and context of in-links from elsewhere—elements manipulable through search engine optimization (175). Mutual linking structures between sites from a sort of "gated community" where only approved sites may enter. Several of the sites I studied—TS Roadmap, Lynn Conway's homepage, and the Transgender Support Site—all had mutual links and recommendations to each other. Through their mutual linking, these sites provide each other algorithmic relevance and legitimacy. These criteria and their malleability are obscured, however, by the algorithm's presumed impartiality and objectivity—presumptions that, in turn, legitimate the accuracy of results (180). Thus, the search engine offers its own disclosure of trans reality built on but distinct from that of site owners. This algorithmic trans reality is determined through a variety of semi-opaque metrics, such as counting semantic markers, prior user behavior, and sites' pre-existing social infrastructure. Because they often do so well at meeting these metrics, the algorithm prioritizes long-standing sites as key touchstones within the transgender territory online, diminishing the statue of more recent sites that came after and offer sustained critique of these touchstones.

The algorithm also ignores or minimizes that which cannot be easily quantified, such as the ideological or temporal aspects of a site's content of a site. Whereas I could clearly recognize the unmistakable (if replicable) markings of age in the texts I encountered in that thrift store—weathered covers, internal discoloration, reader annotations, and even the musty scent that results from the breakdown of the book's chemical components (Strlič et al. 2009)—a website's age is not always easy to determine. Websites are not required to include a publication date, nor

a designation of their updated status. A website can acquire some markings of age, but these can be updated or replaced even as site content stays the same.

Yet temporality and relevance, depending on a searcher's intentions, may be deeply intertwined. In example: a searcher, who is just beginning to think they might be transgender, is curious about what resources might be available to them online. A promisingly titled search result which, upon further examination, is actually just a compendium of nonexistent Geocities homepages is irrelevant in a contemporary media landscape where Geocities is most often referenced as a nostalgic punchline. In this instance, the algorithm's measurements of relevance have little relationship with the searcher's actual needs. However, as Couldry and van Dijck note, search algorithms "never *mimicked* a social process of searching information; they *created* a new system of data circulation based on algorithmically defined criteria of quantified popularity" (2015). Some of this quantification, no doubt, comes from user click counts. These popularity measurements become self-reinforcing: as more and more users focus on the same limited pool of results, their clicks reinforce these algorithm's judgment—even if the users find, upon reading these pages, they have no useful information or information that contradicts a user's own sense of self. That determination, however, has to be made by a human agent who can identify and interpret a site's cultural, contextual, and ideological dimensions.

4.10: Conclusion: Mapping the Territory

In my title, I use philosopher Alfred Korzybski's famous pronouncement, "the map is not the territory." There are many different maps throughout this chapter: trans websites' various mappings of trans discourse and the transition process, the link-based map of the "Further Resources" page, and the map drawn on the results page by the supposedly objective search algorithm. Each map and its respective cartographers, in different ways, aim to call into being

their interpretation of trans territory online. Trans websites, as guides, are particularly useful in illustrating the specifics and process of change—not just the change of medical or social transition, but also the shifts in in-community terminology and discourse, the changes in how trans people experience the process of transition, and the transformation from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0.

However, being able to differentiate between the two is difficult when you don't have a full sense of what the territory could possibly include, only what you've been presented by a search algorithm. It's even harder when you've never seen a map at all. This is the position that the newly out individual, who will at some point likely seek out a search engine like Google to gather more information. This theoretical search engine user, whose lack of knowledge has driven them to search in the first place, looks to the search algorithm as the authority to identify the best and most useful guides for their journey. In this transaction, the user has placed their trust in the algorithm's judgment to guide them, but maybe what they really need is what the algorithm can't provide: a human friend.

Chapter 5: Making a Name for Yourself: Tagging as Transgender Ontological Practice on Tumblr

5.0: Introduction

In his 2013 Buzzfeed article, "Why Tumblr Is Perfect For The Trans Community," author Thomas Page McBee speaks to several different trans bloggers and organizations about why they've sought out Tumblr as their platform of choice. One of the most evocative stories comes from Mo Willis, head of communications for the bklyn boyhood collective, an organization which organizes and hosts events for those who identify as bois, most often trans and masculine-of-center queers of color. Though the bklyn boyhood began as a primarily physical space, the collective started a Tumblr as a way to "extend the physical space itself online." Willis compares their Tumblr to "a vision board, a space to collect the most electrifying and affirming images and snippets and links and conversations on the web." What most struck me, however, was Willis's contrast between Tumblr and other platforms: "For many trans people, Tumblr sites act as an antidote to an indifferent or hostile world. You can Google 'bois,' you can search for all types of phrases and names that relate to our identity and sexuality, and you'll come up with porn" (2013). In this moment, the contextual nuances of the term 'boi' are not apparent to the search algorithm, whose results reproduce dominant norms and narratives. On Tumblr, these narratives can be displaced, demoted, or ignored, as bois cultivate a place that affirms their identities, lived, and experiences.

However, the "indifferent or hostile world" can still encroach, even on Tumblr. In her analysis of nonbinary gender presentation on Tumblr, Oakley notes she initially attempted to collect sample data from the #lesbian tag but found it to be primarily populated by pornography instead of lesbian-identified users (2016). These users, she found, used the #girlswholikegirls

tag—presumably in response to the presence of such pornographic content. On Tumblr in particular, user-assigned tags play an important role in making posts visible and easily searchable, as well as socially locating the user. On a platform where self-presentation and assumed social norms are determined, in part, through social context and imagined audience, such social location is key (boyd 2014). In the context of Tumblr, tag choices may indicate not only content but also audience, intent, and self-identity. The #girlswholikegirls tag, then is a "self-identified" and "community defined" term that serves as "another form of gender and sexual orientation labeling practiced by bloggers" (Oakley 2016).

Though their subjects differ, one consistent aspect flows through both of these narratives: the necessity of that semantic signifier. The identity label helps an individual make sense of their experience and find others who share it. If, to continue the metaphor from Chapter 4, the resource site is the guide that helps trans readers on their journey, those readers need the identity label in order to initially find these guides. Otherwise, their experience will resemble wandering a library where none of the shelves are labelled and the books have blank jackets. Some of these books will, no doubt, have the information readers are looking for, but it may take hours, even days, to find them. On a tag-based platform like Tumblr, tags serve as the shelf labels and book jackets, signaling a post's content and related topics. With the right tag, users can find others like themselves. However, tags on Tumblr differ from the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) in one important way: they are neither universally adopted nor governed by an authoritative body. Though the LCSH have been rightly criticized for the inadequacy of their queer-related subject terminology (Adler 2009, 2013; Angell and Roberto 2014), the universality of the LCSH's adoption means that assigned subject headings are largely consistent between libraries. Tumblr operates on a folksonomy, whose tag meanings are determined by the "folk" of

folksonomy, Tumblr users. But as Oakley's anecdote about the #lesbian and #girlswholikegirls tags illustrates, the folk can impute a variety of meaning to tags and in some cases so dominate a tag they force other users to alter not only their tagging practices, but their very self-identification.

This chapter analyses how trans-identified Tumblr users apply these two aspects of tagging practice, place-making and tagging-as-identity. These users employ tags to not only establish their social identity, context, and audience, but also as commentary mechanisms. The tag becomes "somewhere in particular," the place users can comfortably experience their identity. However, identity-based tags can become the target of debate when users' definitions come in conflict—a problem exacerbated by Tumblr's lack of formal behavioral norms or governance. In these confrontations, at stake is not just what an identity term means but users' right to claim the identity as their own.

5.1: Encountering "Transgender"

A thread underlying all of these chapters, and indeed much of transgender-specific media, is the necessity of "the encounter," that moment when a person recognizes their experience in the trans other (Zimman 2009; Dame 2013). Before this encounter, bodily dysphoria, or the sense of disconnect between one's body and one's sense of themselves, can be difficult to narrate and describe. This is especially true in a wider culture that presents sex and gender assigned at birth as fixed and immutable characteristics. Prior to encountering the identity category of "transgender," trans individuals may have difficulty maintaining a stable self-identity which requires the ongoing construction of a reflexive self-narrative, as individuals "continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self" (Giddens 1991, 54). This self-narrative provides an element of ontological security, the

sense that the individual is complete and whole in themselves—one must not only know who they are and where they fit in, but also be able to communicate it to the wider world (1991). A lack of ontological security, in contrast, contributes to a sense of failed bodily integrity, of being out of place within oneself.

For trans individuals, then, the act of coming in contact with transgender's ontological possibility is key to settling their ontological dislocation. With "transgender," individuals can begin to comprehend their dysphoria and acquire language to more easily articulate their dysphoric emotions. This language is then used to construct a self-narrative which provides internal stability, opens up avenues of support, and makes possible access to necessary medical care if desired. In order to be recognized by other possible trans audiences, following this encounter, trans individuals must signify their own trans status in various ways, from narrative recounting, modes of dress and self-presentation, organization membership, even their social media practices. However, existing subcultural conventions and expectations limit just what kinds of signification will actually be accepted as legibly "trans." In some cases, these signifiers and the narratives that accompany them may, despite their comforting effect, then deliver individuals into "affective and economic systems unconcerned with her own interests" (Sender 2012, p.158).

Furthermore, transgender's own internal stability as an identity category is by no means guaranteed. Initially intended as an inclusive term and site for broad-base political activism, "transgender" took on decidedly more formal ontological functions once it was widely adopted by social services in the early 2000s (Davidson 2007; Valentine 2007). Such limitations led to new efforts to recuperate the term's inclusive possibilities, such as "trans" and "trans*," the latter "[blending] the [asterisk's] wildcard function with its use as a figurative bullet point in a list of

identities that are not predicated on the trans- prefix formulation" (Tompkins 2014). As discussed in Chapter 1, the conflation of transgender with the ideal of community has the effect of obscuring key differences amongst those located, willingly unwillingly, under the community umbrella. In particular, transgender as category "works against other less powerful understandings of gender and sexuality," especially those held by queer people of color, "[fixing] into place particular meanings," in this case, white gender norms, "to the exclusion of others" (Valentine 2007, 104). We can see this exclusion in effect in the experiences of my participants of color, whose difficulty finding representations matching their own was directly related to the dominance of whiteness online.

5.2: Tumblr: "you just won't understand"

Tumblr, founded in 2007, is a microblogging platform where users share posts, pictures, videos, audio, and other short bites of content. In their official press materials, Tumblr eschews defining the site's intent beyond identifying its main function, easily replicable content sharing, and positioning users as "the world's creators." According to industry metrics, Tumblr's user base leans heavily young, with an estimated 40% of users between the ages of 15 to 24 (comScore 2013). Like Twitter, Tumblr utilizes a directed friendship model, wherein there is neither a social nor technical expectation of reciprocal following (Marwick and boyd 2010). Followers' posts appear on one's dashboard, where they can be liked or shared via the "reblog," which allows users to share entire posts—with or without comment—with their own followers. Users can also allow individuals to anonymously "Ask" them questions, which may then be shared with the user's followers.

Each Tumblr post's specific content is defined by its tags, which may shrink or grow as the post is liked and/or reblogged. Table 5.1 lists most frequent functions of Tumblr tags and sample examples:

Tag Functions	**Example**
Description of the post's content	#picture, #meme, #gifset
Post topic	#me, #politics, or #trans
Social context	#real like or #RL
Metacommentary on the user's own thoughts or feelings	#fml, an abbreviation of the phrase "Fuck my life"

Table 5.1 Tag Functions

In tagging, users make their posts visible to a wider possible audience and may subsequently organize around certain tags.[34] In order for any given user's content to reach an audience beyond their own followers, they must use tags. Through their tagging practices, then, Tumblr users speak in what Zappavigna terms "searchable talk," or "online discourse where the primary function appears to be affiliation via 'findability'" (2011, 2). Trans users "find" each other through such shared talk: reblogs, reading a post's notes, and looking at content in trans tags.

The content of user posts on Tumblr are primarily phatic: sharing information with an emphasis placed not only on public conversation but also maintaining connection via expressions of sociability (Miller 2008; Crawford 2010), as funneled through users' self-presentation. In phatic media "it is the connection to the other that becomes significant, and the exchange of words becomes superfluous" (Miller 2008, 395). Making these connections can be particularly

[34] Though much of its content is controlled by users, Tumblr does engage in some content curation: highly popular, general information topics such as #cars, #fashion, #menswear, and #art are designated "featured topics" and the content that appears is curated by a set of at least three editors.

important for queer youth in particular, who use online platforms to augment and build onto their existing social worlds and identities (Gray 2009). Like the youth in Gray's study, on Tumblr queer and trans youth can learn the subcultural codes, modes, and vocabulary—which they may choose to recraft for use in other social contexts—need to be legible as queer to others (2009, 117). Fink and Miller describe a landscape of prolific trans and queer cultural production on Tumblr which consistently challenges dominant norms. However, not all of these productions are new; "vintage" and archival images also circulate, connecting viewers to an "affective archive" that draws attention to gaps in queer history (Cho 2015, 47). All of these posts circulate and recirculate as points of phatic connection through what Alexander Cho terms Tumblr's affective "reverb," a constant cycle of increasing and decreasing circulation, "almost like a breathing thing." (2015, 53).

Figure 5.1: UrbanDictionary definition of "Tumblr."

The affective intensity Cho describes suggests just how important phenomenological experience is to users' understanding of Tumblr—and indeed all social digital platforms. This is best expressed in the definition of Tumblr excerpted in Figure 5.1. As the author presents it, Tumblr

is both the "epitome of culture" and the "antithesis" of contemporary culture. Indeed, the experience of Tumblr's exists prior to conventional explanation, a phenomenological one at the level of affect: with Tumblr, "you either get it or you don't." Tumblr is just more than a platform, then. It's a place, something that must be experienced and requires "proof of the senses." All places are "encultured," and the experience of them comes through one's cultural context—which may be quite different than mass culture (Casey 1993). What matters most about places, according to Casey, is "the experience of being in that place and, more particularly, *becoming part of the place*." Tumblr users' practices, from posting, reblogging, and commenting to tagging, constitute their experience of Tumblr as a place. For trans and queer Tumblr users, especially those whose primary LGBTQ connections come online, Tumblr is the place where their significations of identity—expressed through tags—will be recognized, affirmed, and shared with others.

5.3: Classify Yourself: Locating the User within Infrastructure

As Bowker and Star note in their ethnography of classification systems, *Sorting Things Out*, to classify is human (1999). Humans make sense of information through classification systems, "a set of boxes (metaphorical or literal) into which things can be put to then do some kind of work" (1999, 10). Such classification systems exist as part of a larger infrastructure, such as a database or website (1999, 16). Tumblr tags are one such classification structure, combining social tagging systems in particular: information organization and conversation promotion (Huang, et al. 2010). Social tagging systems differ from traditional classification systems such as "controlled vocabularies" in that their primary architect is not an "authoritative" figure like a librarian and they do not compensate for lexical conflict or anomalies (Macgregor and McCulloch 2006). As noted in the Introduction, the Library of Congress Subject Heading, as a

controlled vocabulary, has been criticized for its limiting and outdated catalog headings for trans and queer-related works (Adler 2009, 2013). In contrast, social tagging is collaborative, with multiple users all contributing something to the tag collection.

These user tags give the information held in the databases which social network platforms like Tumblr narrative meaning and human context. The database and its users, N. Katherine Hayles argues, exist in a symbiotic relationship. The database "catalyzes and indeed demands narrative's reappearance," in this case, tagging, "as soon as meaning and interpretation are required" (Hayles 2007, 1603). Without these tags, posts are classified as "indeterminate" data, rendered null or unpresentable (Hayles 2007, 1605). Users, in contrast, need to database's connection-building skills to in order to find new content, make social connections, and experience Tumblr. User narratives, their tags, "remain the necessary others to database's ontology, the perspectives that invest the formal logic of database operations with human meanings and that gesture toward the unknown hovering beyond the brink of what can be classified and enumerated" (2007, 1607). For queer and trans users, the ability to integrate their narratives into the database opens room to challenge dominant categorization schema and the knowledges they represent. As Adler finds, trans tagging on LibraryThing not only added information but "[provided] a means to negotiate norms of gender expression through categories or labels" (2013, 7).

In a collaborative tagging structure like Tumblr's, tags gradually congeal to form a folksonomy, coined by Vander Wal as "the result of personal free tagging of information and objects (anything with a URL) for one's own retrieval," done in "a social environment (shared and open to others)." The folksonomy's value is in being "derived from people using their own vocabulary and adding explicit meaning" (Vander Wal 2005; see also Peters 2009). Ideally,

folksonomies are emergent and iterative collections which resist concretization and "guarantee a much broader access to [resources]…which is independent of the guardian [infrastructure]" (Peters 2009, 3).[35] As Clay Shirky argues, folksonomies by design resist the ontological impulse, instead trying to "find ways that the individual sense-making can roll up to something which is of value in aggregate, but you do it *without an ontological goal* [emphasis added]…Critically, the semantics here are in the users, not in the system" (2005).

For trans users, however, their goal in tagging is, at some level, inherently ontological: they are using their tags to describe their being. A portion of these users, then, are deeply invested in maintaining ontological stability within tags. As a result, users' narratives around terminology and definitions can became highly pertinent sites of contention. Moreover, while the semantics may be in the users, those users are often working within the constraints of pre-established subcultural vocabularies. Keilty counters Adler's notion of folksonomic freedom (2009), instead arguing that

> the 'exploration' of subject positions within folksonomies is always constrained by a logic requiring instantly recognizable cues, regularized under the conventions of a particular sexual subculture that one inhabits. The sociability of a particular subculture, in fact, relies on such regulatory strictures, just as effective information retrieval relies on control (2012, 419).

For, even though Hayles posits the database can hold multiple narratives, shared subcultural language constrains how these narratives can be told in order to be rendered legible to both database and human user. Though these terms may be modified, their embeddedness makes them central to all possible narratives.

[35] It's worth noting that most research on categorization systems uses data sets from bookmarking services or sites primarily geared toward information organization like Delicious or LibraryThing. While users may connect using these sites' social tools, the tagging system does not form part of the backbone supporting social interaction.

5.4: Methods and Ethics

The dataset consists of publicly available posts using five transgender-related tags (#transgender, #ftm, #mtf, #trans, and #trans*) collected manually through Tumblr's public tag search function (e. g. https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/transgender) during two two-day periods: an initial round focusing on #transgender, #ftm, #mtf in January 2014 and a second theoretical collection in February 2014 collecting posts for the #trans and #trans* tags, which emerged in the first sample as key sites of organization. These tags were chosen for their particular location within the subcultural vocabulary: common enough to be known and used by a variety of trans-identified users, but not so widely used to have a variety of non-trans specific content or, in the case of #LGBTQ, a "featured" tag with its own editors and top contributors.[36] Given the vulnerability of these Tumblr posters, many of whom are transgender-identified youth and may face familial and social ostracization and rejection offline, I also chose not to collect the content of commentary left on posts as "notes" or non-tagged content from individual users' Tumblrs, both "publicly private" venues (Lange 2008). In focusing on common, shared tags, I gathered discourse emically considered public talk. Based on my analysis, users' tagging practices can be loosely organized into three categories: self-identification, conflict management, and definitional policing.

5.5: Analysis: Self-Identification

Because Tumblr lacks a "group" function that allows users to indicate social connection/interest, tags served as a methods for users to make a group membership claim and establish visibility. This model of tag usage is defined by Tonkin et al. as "User - Tag – User," as

[36] Such curation renders an identity category into a generic "interest," and posts using the tag are judged by users empowered to determine what "LGBTQ" means.

"users are tagging to relate their concept of information to another user's concept of some piece of information" and build social connections (2008). As on other social media sites, Tumblr users used contextual cues to determine how they should present themselves and just who might be amongst their audience (boyd 2014, 48). When posting with trans tags, users' imagined audience was trans readers presumed to be fluent in trans terminology and discourse.

In the data, the #transgender tag had the most posts by non-trans identified users. In some cases, usage was grounded in generalized coalition politics: upon its addition to the acronym "LGBT," transgender is often folded into larger discussions of LGBT concerns, regardless of their relevance. As such, #transgender was used in a tag string alongside #gay, #lesbian, and #bi or #bisexual—often on posts that did not speak to trans-related concerns or discourse. Alternately, #transgender was used by non-trans users, including self-identified "radical feminists," who opposed the very idea of transgender identity and transition—a practice which lead one user to rhetorically ask, "you…don't want to hear facts of our disclusion and oppression but you want us to see what you have to say and silence us in the process?"

Lastly, the #transgender tag also included a sizable amount of explicit fetish pornography. As a result, a personal post on a user's transition may appear next to exploitative pornographic imagery simply because they both use the #transgender tag. This juxtaposition reflects how technological structure cannot make meaning determination. For the trans user, such images may prove directly counterproductive to building social connection: they are instead reminded of how their body is commodified and consumed for others' pleasure without their consent. Similar to lesbian-identified users' preference for #girlswholikegirls (Oakley 2016), trans users far more frequently tagged their posts with subculturally specific terms #trans and #trans*. Through repeat usage, these tags took on specific characteristics: #trans was used with

personal content intended for wider audiences, while #trans* was primarily used on politically oriented posts. The choice to avoid #transgender also meant these tags were clearly designated as trans-specific places, where users could be sure to find others who shared their subcultural background.

One of these three (#transgender, #trans, or #trans*) tags were often used alongside other established subcultural vocabulary to provide more specificity. Table 5.2 presents the broad tag categories I observed, as well as example tags.

Tag Category	**Example Tags**
Identity Label	• #transgender • #trans • #ftm • #mtf
Subcultural vocabulary	• #testosterone • #preop
Post content or topic descriptor	• #transition update • #selfie
Personal, individualized tags	• #depression • #personal
Politically-loaded terminology	• #trans* • #cishet • #truscum • #bun pronouns

Table 5.2: Tag Categories

When a trans man tags his post "#ftm #transgender #testosterone #hrt #t," he signifies he's talking about not only transgender topics, but topics relevant to trans men or masculine individuals (#ftm) or those looking for posts on hormone replacement therapy (#hrt), specifically Testosterone (#testosterone). Furthermore, his use of "#t" signals he know trans vocabulary, since testosterone is often shortened to "T"—giving rise to phrases like "time on t." Using trans-

related tags aligns users' definitions and further attests to their group membership. Individualized tags such as #personal, #me, or #family allowed users to specify and give more detail to their personal narratives. In example, a trans woman tagged a post describing being misgendered by a relative and her family coming to her defense with "#Personal #misgendering #Transgender #MTF #Family #FTW (abbreviation for "For The Win")." In this example and others, using these tags on posts discussing mental struggles or personal successes not only signified the personal nature of the content, they laid the foundation for building social connection. Collectively, these tags signal how one user's personal struggles are identified with a larger meaning outside themselves—one that can lead to meaningful social connections and moments of community sentiment.

Users tagging practices, however, were not limited to reinforcing dominant narratives around trans experience, which emphasize personal difficulty, discrimination, or struggle—evidence of which is then used by advocates to argue for legal or social change (Valentine 2007). When users put trans and seeming "unrelated" topics together in their tags, they challenge these dominant narratives, highlighting their everyday interests, desires, and experiences. A trans woman who tags a selfie wearing her Seahawks jersey "#alwaysbe12ing #seahawks #nflplayoffs #mtf #trans* #Transwoman #transgirl #transgender" not only aligns her interests and build social connection, but also suggests how trans users' self-narratives extend beyond the details of social or medical transition. Alternately, trans can be a site of creative potential, as fans reimagine characters as transgender or show off their "#crossplay" (a neologism combining cosplay and crossdressing). Tagging, for trans users, offers the unique possibility to both unobtrusively make their transness relevant in personal, quotidian moments while also rendering their self-narratives more complex.

Lastly, using multiple tags also increased overall post visibility. Tumblr's suggestion algorithm and hierarchy of visibility is largely opaque, determined by a combination of tag usage and co-occurrence. Increasing visibility through tags encourages "tagspam," a problem common to the "User - Tag – User" mode where tags are used inconsistently by "tagging in order that other users see desired information despite the fact that the information is not really classified under their expected concept of that tag" (Tonkin, et al. 2008). Users' tagspam—a practice most often exploited for commercial or promotional purposes—was grounded not in use of subcultural cues, but in suggestion: the reader likes posts using this tag, so they may also like posts under this tag. Used alone or in small groups, tags worked in complementary ways to represents a human narrative. Tagspamming, in contrast, blurs these individual narratives and creates an undifferentiated mass.

In these instances, the user-centered folksonomy can't account for users' different intentions and posting habits: the social Tumblr user who wants to both display their self-identity and maintain social connections and the corporate account that makes hundreds of automated posts at day. Both usages are given equal weight by Tumblr and may have an equal influence on shaping the folksonomy. This is evident in the results returned by Tumblr's similarity algorithm: despite trans users avoiding using the #transgender tag, a search for #mtf and #trans both returned fetish pornography blogs as suggestions to follow. In this case, hegemonic understandings of trans women and trans feminine individuals remain present in Tumblr's definition of "trans." Repeat usage can also lead to ossification: prominent tags within a folksonomy emerge as "stable consensus" choices with similarly static definitions (Golder and Huberman 2006, 207). In response, some users introduced new acronyms such as "MOGAI" or "MOGII" (Marginalized Orientations, Gender Identities, And Intersex) they could shape through

individual use, independent of existing vocabulary or wider cultural influence. However, without a strong subcultural association, these terms can only go so far. Well-established subcultural terms resist attempt at disruption and instead insinuate themselves within users' narratives, becoming the de facto "place" where trans users experience their identity—even for those users who don't identify with the language used.

Returning to the anecdote from the introduction, brklyn boyhood's Tumblr may have offered new possibilities, but the #boi tag on Tumblr reflects an inescapable realities of publicly accessible internet platforms: it's not a matter of if, but when porn spam bots will begin using them in earnest. Searching for #boi brings up a mix of explicit fetish pornography, fannish reaction posts using memes that include "boi," and user selfies (including some that qualify as Not Safe For Work)—a very small subset of which are by queer users of color. This is not to suggest that Willis's argument is incorrect, as a search for #boi with #queer or #qpoc (queer person of color) brings up only selfies and posts by queer of color users. The necessity of the #queer or #qpoc tag, however, draws attention to how tags can take on an ontological character. The "stable consensus" narratives of transgender reality are those focus on embodying the hegemonic norms of the "good trans subject" (Irving 2008). Their consensus status arises from their cultural dominance, and like transgender as category (Valentine 2007), their overwhelming presence means other narratives and their associated terms lie at the fringes of the folksonomy, if they appear at all.

Compare the search results for various trans-related identity terms. A search for "trans" brings up "LGBT, FTM, NONBINARY, QUEER, TS" as a list of associated terms, while "trans*" results in "NONBINARY, LGBT, FTM, QUEER, GENDER." None of these terms appear when searching for "boi," which bring up "BTS, JUNGKOOK, *INHALES*,

VOLTRON, JIMIN:" three terms (BTS, JUNGKOOK, and JIMIN) related to a popular K-Pop (Korean pop) band, one reference to a reaction meme (*INHALES*), and the American adaption of the Japanese giant robot anime Go Lion, recently revived on Netflix (VOLTRON). Searching for "boi qpoc," "boi queer," or "boi poc," in contrast, brings up no related terms at all.[37] Because they are not within the folksonomy, the database has no reason to connect these concepts or suggest that searchers might be interested in users who use these tags. In order to be visible to the database, users who fall somewhere within the spectrum of transgender identity must use either #trans or #trans* to be recognized. I suggest this not to invalidate how these users identify, but to illustrate the inherently ontological nature of folksonomic tagging on platforms like Tumblr. A folksonomy may begin without an ontological goal, but it will inevitably achieve one because the users giving it structure and narrative each have their own ontological investments, embodied and reflected in their tagging practices. When these investments arise from a category that is, at its foundation, invested in representing the widest swath of identities possible, the most normative identities will be those that are most visible at the macro level of the database. Thus, a small pool of tags are required to signal a variety of disparate narratives.

5.6: Conflict Management and User-Developed Social Structure

User conflict on trans Tumblr centers around which of these narratives would be used by the database to give its data meaning. User debate, primarily carried out through reblogs and notes left on posts, focused on tags' definitions and what constituted appropriate use. Despite users' accusations that other users had targeted them for aggressive harassment, only one user in

[37] Using these intersection terms does, however, support the formation of enclave counterpublics (Squires 2002), which function largely outside of the wider Tumblr public sphere. These counterpublics can center the concerns and needs of queer users of color in multiple, meaningful ways. But because they're enclaves, they exist outside of all folksonomies—existing at a level at which they are neither "indeterminate" nor of such seeming value to merit being linked to other data.

the dataset reported asking Tumblr to intervene and discipline a blog for using both #feminism and "degrading language and slurs" as tags on images with a "fetishistic feel." Tumblr users have few publicly defined options for corporate intervention when they do seek it out. At the time this data was collected, "Harassment" was not defined in Tumblr's Community Guidelines, which spoke only of "Malicious Speech," a category identical in content to legal definitions of "hate speech." While the guidelines do outline Tumblr's willingness to remove "overtly malicious" postings, users are encouraged to "dismantle negative speech through argument rather than censorship"—by implication positioning platform governance's intervention as censorship and contradictory to Tumblr's deep commitment to free speech (Community Guidelines 2014). In other words, users are expected to handle concerns at the individual level and only call on Tumblr's governance structures for what could legally be understood as hate speech.

However, social structures will always emerge amongst social groups—including ones communicating primarily online (Freeman 2013; Báez 2013). If a formal structure is not established, intentionally or not, informal structures are established and adopted over time. In the absence of a platform level structure for handling disputes, trans Tumblr users defaulted to informal structures for managing conflict at the individual level through site affordances—practices they would practices which some later attempted to enforce as broader trans cultural norms governing others' actions.[38] Users manipulated Tumblr's technological affordances, including tags, to develop and promote a variety of emergent, contextually specific social and behavioral norms. These norms reflected users' desire to manage their self-presentation, local social context, and wider tag definitions. In so doing, they intentionally applied Tumblr's

[38] In a situation where both formal and informal structures coexist, formal structure serves to "hinder the informal structure from having predominant control" and offers means to dismantle it if necessary (Freeman 2013, p. 232-233). However, Tumblr's formal structures were rarely invoked to hinder users' own informal practices.

affordances in specific situations to achieve privacy and ephemerality, increase the spread and persistence of debates, or control tag definitions.

5.6.1: Achieving Privacy and Ephemerality

Like Twitter, Tumblr's internal public/private settings are clear-cut: either a post is visible to all users, visible only to one's followers, or visible only to the poster themselves. However, users work around these restrictions through social management of posts' visibility. On particularly sensitive posts, users limited their tag use, making their posts "publicly private," publicly visible but difficult to find unless one knows the proper tags (Lange 2008). These posts became less visible to others as a result of their decreased searchability. They might also ask readers to reblog or not reblog a post in the post body or tags.

Using tags in this way was one example of tags serving as sites for commentary. In some cases, users added commentary tags expressing opinions or emotions in support or contradictory to their posted statements above. Huang, et al. defines such tags as "conversational" tags, such as a group in-joke or a commentary on the posting itself (2010). These can later become "micro-memes," "emergent topics for which a tag is created, used widely for a few days, then disappears" (2010, 174). Journalist Julia Turner has argued such tags are not unlike musical refrains or parenthetical statements that reinforce the proceeding statement (2012).[39]

Users applied conversational tags in a variety of ways, depending on the post's content and context. On personal posts, commentary tags drew attention to aspects of a post or selfie ("#look at that stache tho"), commented on the context for life or appearance changes ("#just

[39] Interestingly, Tumblr's community guidelines now ask users to not use posts with tags that "will mislead or deceive searchers" or "overload your posts with #barely #relevant #tags." However, they do qualify "punchline" tags that "add meaning or context to a post" as valid. (Tumblr 2014).

fucking around with my hair again #psh i'll rock it"), or safely engaged in public self-contradiction ("#i've had three beers y'all make me stop #i hope this is more endearing than awkward why am i posting this oh well"). In particularly long commentary tag chains, the hash symbol (#) acted as an all-purpose punctuation dividing up related statements. Conversational tags on political or argumentative posts, in contrast, reinforced the post's overall argument or escalated the confrontation in comparison to the post, such as "#i'm fuckin sick of cisbro apologists #lmao but they're nice people!!" or "#It's true though #dont tell me it isn't." Furthermore, because tags are not copied when a post is reblogged, placing these sentiments in tags reduced their visibility and deceased their overall persistence. In this way, socially or emotionally risky statements did not have the same lasting impact as the post itself. Unlike identity terminology, conversational tags represent "the unknown hovering beyond the brink" of what can be classified: the experience of shared sentiment. Like community sentiment, they are experienced within the moment, but their unique nature makes them impossible for the database to preserve.

5.6.2: Persistent Debate and Policing

Debates achieved persistence and resisted resolution when users tagged posts with either a designated "micro-meme" or fraught subcultural terminology. These tags, firstly, they made debates easier for a wide group of users participate in: as a user only has to know the proper keyword to add their voice regardless if others are concurrently participating. Secondly, they provided the database with the narrative necessary to collects these posts into a searchable, persistent archive—allowing users to actively patrol for and police opponents. In a debate about what counted as legitimate gender-neutral pronouns individuals could use, the example "bun/buns/bunself" became emblematic for opponents of what they argued were "made up"

pronouns' "ridiculousness." The "micro-meme" "#bun pronouns" emerged out of this debate and was used on posts dismissing such pronouns—in one highly shared post, the user parodied a generic coming out conversation with the trans subject replaced by an individual who identifies as a pastry. In all of these cases, the tag both indicated a user's ideological position and added the post to the ongoing archive of debate.

When narratives for subcultural terms came into conflict, users were divided around what purpose a tag should serve, information organization or conversation promotion (Huang, et al. 2010), and when it should be applied. Those who favored informational uses for trans tags derided personal posts (such as those containing only selfies or daily updates) as irrelevant, while those in favor of personal posts were open to both uses. In their posts, users would use commentary tags as a metacomment on this divide and their position. These tags asserted the relevance of the post ("#so the trans tag /is/ relevant") and legitimated the user's tag usage ("#i will keep tagging it trans* because that's where the biggest idiots are").

Some users who favored informational use self-designated themselves as "tag police," reblogging and responding to posts whose tag usage and content they found antithetical to "#transgender," "#trans" or "#trans*". Such definitional debates have a long history in transgender discourse, as individuals contend just who is included in under the transgender umbrella (Davidson 2007). In the informally structured space of Tumblr, users with a particular interest controlling the folksonomy's development vied to form an elite, a "small group of people," often friends, who share the same values and "have power over a larger group of which they are part, usually without direct responsibility to that larger group, and often without their knowledge or consent" (Freeman 2013, 233-234).

This move, in turn, authorized their policing of other users' narratives, as expressed through their tagging and posting practices. The "tag police" favored a narrative based in exclusive definitions of trans, particularly around the experience of gender dysphoria. On one reblogged post, a tag police user argued "dysphoria over your sex characteristics" was "literally fucking required to be trans." Another user bemoaned how "our spaces and conversations end up hijacked by non-dysphoric non-binary teenagers who would rather spend their time making lists of nonsense pronouns" and suggested "we clearly need to separate transsexualism from transgenderism because our means and aims are so widely divergent." Their use of "we" encapsulates a similarly inclined imagined audience who share the same narrative. For these users, gender dysphoria was the key requirement for claiming trans identity, and those who failed to express dysphoria were not "really" trans—and thus lacked the authority to post using the trans tag. Without established norms enforced by authorized figures marking such behavior as socially unacceptable, these users felt their corrections and horizontal disciplining were justified.

The tag police's ideological stance, and their subsequent targeting of users, illustrates the stakes embedded in tag definition. For the tag police, dysphoria often lies at the core of their own reflexive self-narrative and their understanding of transgender as an ontological category. As Keilty's argues of identity tags on XTube, "these terms are deeply personal and social, such a part of one's identity in relation to others that one feels the need to intervene into others' self-understanding when confronted with difference" (2012, 427). Furthermore, the subcultural vocabulary available to users constrains their linguistic options—as noted earlier, one may invent or adopt new terminology, but there is no guarantee one's self-narrative will be legible to others or the database. Other users who claimed a "trans" identity through their tagging while also rejecting the necessity of dysphoria called into question the category's knowability and

necessarily the self-narrative of the "tag police," who do consider dysphoria central to "trans" identity.

In their ideological positioning, the "tag police" revived the terminology debates discussed in Chapter 4 that so pervasively linger throughout trans informational sites. The inclusive intentions of "trans" butt up against these users' deeply felt narratives of self, and without another term to use ("transsexual" is almost exclusively used to tag fetish pornography), "trans" is the only place allotted to them. Their choice keep using Tumblr to police the tag, instead of simply moving to another platform presumably free of "non-dysphoric non-binary teenagers" and their "nonsense pronouns," arises from their own deeply felt sense of place on Tumblr. Their "spaces and conversations" are in the "trans" tag, and their identity has become part of the place—so much so they would rather discipline others than leave it.

Such disagreement, when it occurs on other platforms, does not necessarily have to be a permanent fixture. When faced with "a disagreement about the boundaries of [a] term," XTube users in Keilty's study ultimately "[agreed] to disagree, [seeming] to accept that the word has multiple meanings and retrieves a variety of results," suggesting how "such disagreement…leads to multiple consolidations of regulations and re-regulations that likely change over time" (2012, 427). However, Tumblr's technical affordances resist achieving such closure. In Keilty's study, debates around terminology were hosted on the user-edited XTube wiki page, separate from XTube's central architecture—where the folksonomy is actively maintained. Keilty's formulation, as I read it, suggests iterative re-regulation, questions that open and close from time to time. Debates on Tumblr, in contrast, frequently happen on-site through reblogs. Only through iterative sharing and growing user commentary can a discussion spread and have new voices enter. If a debate were moved off-site, it would lose access to Tumblr's affordances.

Thus, questions on Tumblr are always open for debate because they remain persistently visible, sharable, and spreadable. Here, the "reverb" effect, "the wake of…affective charge" that accompanies the movement and circulation of Tumblr posts brings about a different kind of queer affect. According to Cho, affective meaning on Tumblr has a persistence, lingering within content long after its initial posting. He uses the example of a photo collage promoting "Spirit Day," a holiday honoring six gay young men who committed suicide due to homophobia. These young men's smiling portraits, collected together in one image, reminds viewers not only of their loss, but "the duplicitous nature of systemic homophobic abuse," which requires one to continue smiling through their pain. Cho wonders if "the creators of Spirit Day realize their double entendre: not simply honoring these boys' youthful spirit, but also regarding them as spirits, continually haunting us" (2015, 53). In these arguments over terminology, a different sort of affect haunts these tags: the negative affect of delegitimization, the persistent possibility that trans peoples' understandings of themselves was, is, and always will be false. Like Andrea James's "fake transsexuals" pages, whose simple Photoshopped images continue to appear long after their creators have moved on, accusations of "fakery" continue to resonate throughout these tags. As these debates reverberate, the element of uncertainty that tag police introduce into their narrative worms its way into the database's understanding of "trans" content. When user debate about site structure happens within site structure, it becomes embedded within tags' meaning. Absent formal social norms, users knowingly or unknowingly impose their preferred narrative as one method for resolving their sense of ontological uncertainty.

5.7: Conclusion

Subcultural transgender vocabulary and site architecture structure trans Tumblr users' interactions. Through their posts, trans users articulate a self-narrative establishing their

transgender membership in both post content and tags, which simultaneously serve as self-descriptors and identity markers. Conflicting interests influence how users tag, as trans users set themselves apart from wider public discourse through the use of subcultural terms "trans" and "trans*" instead of the more "public" term "transgender." The folksonomy, unable to account for different user practices, gives them equal weight in influencing its development. As the folksonomy settles into a stable, ontological organization through repeat use, the vocabulary options available to trans users are limited. Given the deep importance of ontological security to trans self-narrative, users react strongly to contestations over the meanings assigned to this limited vocabulary. Without a structuring apparatus to maintain social norms, users implemented horizontal discipline to resolve the embedded uncertainty around tag definition. Users' reaction and subsequent actions arise from their investment in Tumblr as a place where they experience their trans identities.

At the crux of all of these elements is the subcultural vocabulary, and especially identity categories. Users express their identity, make social connections, and find their place online through their use of these subcultural terms. An increasing emphasis on vocabulary, however, means that this vocabulary carries so much more weight—especially in a digital environment that increasingly relies on users categorizing their own content. Recent emphasis in systems design has been placed on the Semantic Web, a concept which shifts designers' focus from a "web of documents" to a web of linked data, rendered searchable and accessible through vocabularies, the "semantics" of the semantic web, which "classify the terms that can be used in a particular application, characterize possible relationships, and define possible constraints on using those terms" (World Wide Web Consortium). Rhetoric around the Semantic Web lauds its

emancipatory possibilities, rooted in “a sense of teleological progress, of purposeful and directed development, of continual and designed improvement” (Beer 2009, 986).

However, the Semantic Web’s emphasis on language draws attention to classification and categorization’s limitations in encompassing the scope of human self-presentation and performance. Bowker and Star, reflecting on the state of classification at the beginning of the new millennium, find individuals increasingly live in a “classification society,” “socialized to become that which can be measured by our increasingly sophisticated measurement tools” (1999, 326). Valentine’s chronicling of how individuals with a variety of self-narratives and identity labels were flattened into the category “transgender” is a particularly potent example of self-narrative being subsumed to the classification system (2007).

The performance of self cannot exist independent of the social and technical classification systems which will be applied to it. In a social tagging architecture like Tumblr’s, users are expected to self-categorize, to transubstantiate their lived gender performance into a set of subcultural linguistic labels. To refuse is to become invisible; again, the database cannot make sense of that which goes unnamed. As I found, users had two responses when they felt constrained by the imperative to self-categorization, as embodied in social tagging and the folksonomy: create new terminology or police other users’ tag usage. In both cases, the linguistic carries within it the unbearable weight of the self, which continually exceeds and overwhelms its capabilities.

Conclusion: What Community Can Be

As I explained in Chapter 1, the paradox of community permeates much communication online. In each of my case studies, users on each platform, in different ways, found themselves caught between the uncomfortable juxtaposition of community as ideal and community in practice. On Usenet, 'cisgender' symbolized the hostile opposition to an idealized transgender community. For Blake and those posters who used cisgender, the term guided a variety of gender nonconforming individuals to gather under transgender's aegis against a hostile cisgender world. In practice, cisgender reinforced existing divisions within trans discourse, creating an us/them dynamic within trans newsgroups on Usenet. Broader public acceptance of cisgender, ironically, gradually rendered transgender posters' own identity invisible.

For contemporary users, they have a variety of approaches to community, and some remain ambivalent to it. They seek the kind of social connection with other users that symbolizes ideal community, yet in practice these communities tend to be limited to people like themselves. As to their understanding of "transgender" as community, search algorithms play an important role in exposing them to some resources, often long-standing websites, but not others. These websites, as texts, express in differing ways a vision of ideal community—which they attempt to put into practice through their advice. For some site owners in particular, the community they enact is populated by only respectable trans subjects. Signs of deviance from gender norms place certain individuals outside of the boundaries that define the "transgender community," marking them as failed subjects. On Tumblr, tags serve as the "place" of ideal community, where users live out their trans identity, find each other, and connect. However, when posters' definitions of trans identity come into conflict, users conflate identity and place, as tags become the place users live out their identity. Tag policing, then, is an attempt to enforce users' vision of ideal community onto the community in practice.

And in each case, platform affordances which were meant in design to support ideal community had more complicated effects in practice. Usenet's lack of technical restrictions on posting allowed highly active users to dominate newsgroup discussions, and the lack of moderation encouraged users to accept aggression and flaming as a social norm, instead of seeking reconciliation and community sentiment within disagreement. Furthermore, Usenet newsgroups' reliance on charters and FAQs for social governance, instead of moderation, meant prominent and active users could use these documents, as Blake did, to summarily exclude whole populations of possible members. The ability to selectively follow or friend other users on contemporary platforms does, in contrast, allow users to specifically seek out other trans individuals. Unlike posters to a Usenet newsgroup, users can proactively insulate themselves from exposure to unprovoked aggression. However, filtering who you friend or follow also means that users can restrict their exposure to different experiences or opinions within the "transgender community." Users don't talk across age, race, or class divides about their differing experiences and what trans identity means for them. Users' following practices reinforce existing distributions of power, favoring white, middle-class trans individuals.

As static texts, websites also do little to challenge these norms. Located somewhere between the homepage of the 1990s and the website of the contemporary web, they simultaneously serve as embodiments of their owners and value-neutral information resources. As such, owners' opinions, viewpoints, and social location shape the information their sites present. The static nature of the site means information can age rapidly, as doctors move or retire, civil laws change, and new terminology becomes the in-community norm. Yet where the age of sites' information might give readers' pause, the search engine flattens these temporal differences. Users interpret these search engine results as authoritative, yet the judgment that

goes into constructing them remains opaque. Folksonomic tag structures, of all the affordances, allow users the most flexibility to define their own vocabulary for the database, instead of relying on an outside authority. However, folksonomies by design assume two things: firstly, that there is not an already existing subcultural vocabulary limiting users' possible lexical choices, and secondly, that users' investment in the folksonomy will be categorical, not ontological. When a folksonomy takes on ontological characteristics, user focus shifts from successful organization to making sure the folksonomy reflects their understanding of their world, as communicated by the existing subcultural vocabulary.

Nevertheless, moments of community sentiment still emerged even as each of these chapters analyzed on community's failures as a guiding framework. I introduced my dissertation with the story of Terri Main and the GenderLine forum not only because it is one of the earliest examples of public writing about trans communication online, but also because it speaks poignantly to the impact of community sentiment. Though GenderLine, Main found "love" and acceptance, that "big worldwide electronic hug." These came in the small and mundane interactions: the quick posts between Joann Percy and other Usenet regulars after her update, the innumerable daily interactions of my participants, or the likes and supportive notes on a selfie posted to Tumblr. Even in a static medium like the website, site owners aspire for their readers to feel that sense of shared sentiment when they encounter a photo or a narrative that mirrors their own experience. These moments of affective connection are the real trans community online. Not every attempt to make connection is always successful, and not every encounter will be ideal. The worlds users disclose to each other might differ radically, but each and every one of these disclosures expand the boundaries of what "trans" can be.

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