

Transgender identity management across social media platforms

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Abstract

Transgender people use social media for identity work, which takes place over time and across platforms. In this study, we interviewed 20 transgender social media users to examine transgender identity management across the social media ecosystem. We found that transgender social media users curate their social media experiences to fit their needs through creating accounts on different platforms, maintaining multiple accounts on individual platforms, and making active decisions about content they post, networks they are connected to, and content they interact with. In this way, transgender people's social media curation is not limited to their own identity presentations, but also involves curating the content they see from others and whom they include in their networks. Together, these two types of online curation enable transgender social media users to craft social media worlds that meet their social and self-presentational needs.

Keywords

LGBTQ+, nonbinary, online identity, online self-presentation, social media, social media ecosystem, transgender

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Introduction

Social media and the Internet more broadly have allowed transgender individuals (people whose gender differs from that assigned at birth, including nonbinary people; hereafter shortened to ‘trans’) to connect with community, resources and information (Cannon et al., 2017; Hill, 2005). These connections have made social media spaces where trans people can explore and express their trans identities.

Social media users actively manage their identities and self-presentations (Krämer and Winter, 2008), and social media platforms are tools people use to shape their identities (van Dijck, 2013). Trans users in particular use social media to explore and present new and emerging identities (Cavalcante, 2016; Kitzie, 2018). As social media platforms have limited affordances (e.g. platform features), trans users may not have the tools needed to represent their identities online; many inventively and strategically apply platform settings to achieve identity goals (Bivens, 2017; Cavalcante, 2016).

Our work contributes to a growing body of literature on how trans people use social media for identity work, with a particular interest in trans identity management *across the social media ecosystem* (e.g. how people’s identities differ or not across different social media sites). Our overarching research question for this work is: *How do trans individuals navigate identity management across social media platforms and accounts?*

Through interviews with trans social media users ($n=20$), this study finds that trans people use social media strategically in relation to their trans identity through using different platforms and accounts and curating their networks and content. We reinforce prior research in finding that users maintain social media ecosystems rather than sharing on single platforms (Xiao et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2016) and that social media can have a major impact on trans identity (Cannon et al., 2017; Cavalcante, 2016, 2018; Farber, 2017). Our unique contributions include examining the social media ecosystem in a trans context and exploring how users curate the content they interact with to enable enjoyable online experiences. It is important to study online identity presentation in a trans context as trans social media users may have much at stake when managing online selves due to their marginalized identities and potential negative consequences (e.g. discrimination, harassment) if identity comes across incorrectly.

Related work

Social media ecosystems

Social media users typically maintain an account on more than one platform (Zhao et al., 2016). Users consider platform affordances, networks, and content when choosing to create and maintain multiple accounts (DeVito et al., 2018). Often, multiple accounts are intended to create separate networks and separate spaces for content; however, overlap between platforms may occur (Zhao et al., 2016). Social media users may also create additional accounts on an individual platform, often to present an alternative self (Xiao et al., 2020). On ‘finstas’ (meaning alternative, typically private Instagram accounts), users present less filtered selves, engage more deeply with their (typically smaller) networks, and share emotions more openly (Duffy and Chan, 2019; Xiao et al., 2020). Xiao

et al. (2020) describe finstas as user-designed, ‘intimate reconfigurations’ of Instagram, which repurpose and subvert existing platform functions to create ‘a space of greater privacy and emotional support’ (p. 9). By maintaining a diverse social media ecosystem, users can separate and self-censor content based on their imagined audience on a particular account and the platform’s affordances and norms (Duffy and Chan, 2019; Marwick and boyd, 2010; Zhao et al., 2016). However, despite evidence that people present multiple rather than singular identities online, social and technological forces still aim to restrict and simplify identity presentation (Haimson and Hoffmann, 2016; van Zoonen, 2013).

The importance of social media ecosystems and identity multiplicity is highlighted when users have marginalized identities. LGBTQ+ individuals consider network, cultural, material, and platform norms and concerns when strategizing how much to conceal or express their LGBTQ+ identities (Cho, 2017; DeVito et al., 2018; Dhoest and Szulc, 2016). Concerns may be fewer on sites geared toward LGBTQ+ users or where people could be anonymous, allowing them to ‘compartmentalize their gay (sexual) life’ (Dhoest and Szulc, 2016: 9). Hanckel et al. (2019) described the careful boundary management strategies that LGBTQ+ young people use to mitigate risk, marginalization and stigma related to their LGBTQ+ identities. By taking advantage of multiple platforms and their associated networks, affordances, and norms, LGBTQ+ users are often able to strategically separate and share their identities in order to gain the benefits of social media while avoiding potential stigmatization or negative experiences (DeVito et al., 2018).

Social media as a trans resource and source of community

Trans people cite both their personal networks and the Internet as preferred sources to learn about trans identity and resources (Pohjanen and Kortelainen, 2016). Accordingly, social media is also often a trans informational mainstay as it builds upon the strengths of personal networks and the Internet by allowing trans people to connect and share with each other, regardless of geographic and social differences (Psihopaidas, 2017). Social media often works as a resource for trans individuals, allowing them to connect with their networks and solicit and share information (Cannon et al., 2017). Social media enables multiple diverse viewpoints and people feel that they can share more personal information than in face-to-face interactions (Farber, 2017), likely due in part to some online spaces enabling anonymity and separation from offline identity (Haimson, 2018). Thus, social media sites are rich sources of information for trans people seeking more information about trans issues.

Social media is also a source of community for trans people. Social media can perform sociopolitical and cultural functions such as social, traditional, and experiential learning and teaching (Cannon et al., 2017; Cavalcante, 2016, 2018), and can also be important spaces for online community organizing (Costanza-Chock et al., 2017). In this way, trans people can learn about the dominant issues in trans communities while also learning and creating a shared, collective history (Cavalcante, 2018; Jackson et al., 2017). Social media sites can become ‘counterpublics’, which are member-created and maintained groups centered around marginalized identities (Cavalcante, 2018; Jenzen, 2017). At its best, social media site Tumblr centered queerness and transness (Haimson

et al., 2019), providing users who had experienced marginalization in their everyday lives a place where queerness is valued and diverse (Cavalcante, 2018).

Self-disclosure online

People disclose personal information, such as trans status, on social media for a variety of reasons (e.g. informing their networks, looking to build community) (Haimson, 2018). Self-disclosure has community-building effects, can be communicative, and can act as a social currency, a way to gain influence and attention or make connections (Butler et al., 2011; Cavalcante, 2016). After seeing others post about their difficult or stigmatized experiences, social media users often feel more comfortable sharing their own, in what Andalibi and Forte (2018) called 'network-level reciprocal disclosure'. Further, by disclosing, people are often able to become a source of support for others in their networks who had similar experiences (Andalibi and Forte, 2018).

How much trans and LGBTQ individuals disclose about their gender and/or sexuality on social media impacts what they post and how they interact with LGBTQ+ content (Fox and Warber, 2015; Hanckel et al., 2019). Fox and Warber (2015) observed a 'spiral of silence' (p. 91), wherein LGBTQ+ individuals self-policed their social media use due to the assumption of largely anti-LGBTQ+ networks. While this monitoring is a regular occurrence, it is difficult to maintain (Cannon et al., 2017). As LGBTQ+ people move through varying levels of 'outness', their identity management and social media activity shift (Fox and Warber, 2015). Haimson (2018) found that when trans users wanted to disclose their trans identity to wider networks, they often posted on Facebook where they could mass disclose their trans status.

Online identity

Social media enable people to control, manipulate, and maintain the impressions they make, in efforts to manage identity presentation across platforms (Syed et al., 2018; van Dijck, 2013). People engage in identity work to create desired self-image (Goffman, 1959; Kitzie, 2018). Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) found that people worked to create their offline life online, limiting the discrepancies between the two. At the same time, people curated and edited their online presentation, which exemplifies Goffman's (1959) notion of 'front stage', in which people project identity deliberately (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013). Not only do people manage their identities and impressions online, but they are aware of this management and manipulation (Krämer and Winter, 2008).

Social media can be a 'testing ground for identity' (Cavalcante, 2016: 115), where users can try out different identities, names and presentations. Trans users often actively manage their virtual identity, controlling how public their identity is (Cavalcante, 2016). Trans users work within the frames of the social media sites they are on to express their identities, and often find ways to explore gender identity with the technology available to them, such as by creating online identities with different gender expressions (Cavalcante, 2016). Typically, social media platforms do not offer affordances useful for expressing multiple identities or identities in transition (Kitzie, 2018). Some sites, like

Tumblr, have provided users with the network separation and ability to explore and change identity (Haimson et al., 2019) that allow for transition work and identity presentation. However, this is not always the case, and sites may make changes that affect these affordances (Haimson et al., 2019), leading to users strategically using site features and general assumptions of sites to make their profiles be viewed as authentic. For example, prior to Facebook adding custom gender options in 2014, users were able to ‘hack’ the site in a way that allowed them to remove any gender designation from their accounts, though this lack of gender was still noted on Facebook’s end (Bivens, 2017). Used together, social media platforms can work as ‘social transition machinery’, allowing users to do transition work and have separate networks of support throughout transition periods (Haimson, 2018).

In summary, previous work demonstrated the importance of social media as a resource for trans people and explored how users navigate the social media ecosystem and their online selves. We extend prior work by examining how people perform trans identity work and management via multiple accounts both within the same platform and across platforms. While many social media users maintain separate networks and content between accounts and platforms, for trans users, the stakes of keeping these separate are especially high as they may have networks who are unaware or unsupportive of their trans identity. This project expands on prior work by detailing the decisions and considerations behind trans individuals’ social media presentation across different profiles and platforms. Further, we describe how trans people work within the constraints of existing sites to create enjoyable online experiences for themselves.

Methods

Participants were recruited via social media and a pool of participants from our research group’s prior projects who had consented to being contacted for further studies. Recruitment posts were publicly posted on research team members’ Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts where they were then shared widely beyond our personal networks. Recruitment information was also shared in a number of Discord servers and private Facebook groups catering to trans communities. Recruitment posts linked to a screening survey that asked for information about respondents’ social media use and demographics. We performed purposive sampling from a pool of 220 individuals (200 survey respondents and 20 participants from prior studies) to select a diverse group of interview participants with particular attention to age, gender and race (see Table 1 for participant demographics).

Interviews were semi-structured and took place via video or voice call. Interview questions were centered around four categories: social media, identity, social media and trans identity, and social media and self-esteem. Interviews lasted on average 68 minutes ($sd=13.16$). All interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. All participants were given a \$40 incentive. Every step in this research process was approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board.

The first two interview transcripts were coded separately by the authors using line-by-line inductive open coding (Lofland et al., 2005). We then met to discuss our codes and

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Participant	Gender	Age	Race/ethnicity	Social media used
P1	Trans	33	Black/multi	Facebook, Twitter
P2	Trans	25	African American	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Grindr, Tumblr
P3	Nonbinary	19	White/Hispanic	Facebook, Twitter, Tiktok, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, Reddit, Discord
P4	Nonbinary trans femme	31	Asian American	Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, LinkedIn, Instagram, Reddit
P5	Male	18	White	Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat, Discord
P6	Woman	32	White	Twitter, Discord
P7	Nonbinary transmasc	25	Biracial (Asian and White)	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram
P8	Genderqueer	18	White	Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Discord
P9	Nonbinary	19	African/American	Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit
P10	Nonbinary	29	Black and indigenous	Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Discord
P11	Nonbinary	20	African American	Twitter, Tumblr, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, Discord, Reddit, Vent
P12	Nonbinary	35	Asian	Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, LinkedIn, Instagram, Reddit, Discord, FetLife
P13	Trans/nonbinary	19	White, Latinx/Latine, some Native American heritage	Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, Discord, Amino
P14	Female	37	White	Facebook
P15	Biologically female	38	Mixed race Black/White/Native American	Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest
P16	Nonbinary	25	Asian American/Filipino American	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat
P17	Nonbinary	34	Latinx	Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, Discord
P18	Male	38	White non-Hispanic	Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Tumblr, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest
P19	Woman	23	White	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit
P20	Nonbinary	20	Chinese	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram

Demographics are presented as shared on the screening survey.

begin consolidating and categorizing them. After this, the first author finished consolidating the codes and organized them into themes using axial coding. Two authors then coded the rest of the interview transcripts using these codes.

Results

Multiple accounts

Differing identity presentations across different platforms. Participants found ways to strategically curate their social media experiences to work better for them. Participants held multiple social media accounts both across different platforms (e.g. on Facebook and Twitter) and within the same platform (e.g. having multiple Twitter accounts). They described using these separate accounts for differently nuanced identity presentations. In this way, each account held distinct value from other accounts. Where there was overlap, participants considered the site's norms, their networks, and the account's privacy settings. Some participants distinguished accounts by how professional or how personal they were, like P3 who said,

On my college campus. . . I participate in a lot of leadership positions. . . I do have an agreement with my school that I keep my Twitter kind of professional almost. . . My Instagram is definitely a lot more personal use I would say. I don't ever post anything political or social justice or anything like that.

Some participants distinguished accounts by what aspects of their identity they highlighted, like P16, who shared, '*Facebook was a free-for-all for my AAPI [Asian American and Pacific Islander] identity. So I just leaned into that more on Facebook. I guess that's also why I see Instagram as more of my queer safe space*'. Regardless of their intention in using different platforms, participants had clear reasons for their varied use.

Multiple accounts on same platform. Similar to the use of different platforms, participants had intentional reasons for maintaining multiple accounts on the same site. P2 described his reasoning for having multiple Twitter accounts as wanting separate places for different types of expression: '*Sometimes I just want to express myself differently. Like some things I share on Twitter. . . I won't share on the other Twitter or just sometimes I want to say stuff and I don't want certain people to see*'. Personal versus professional presentation again came up as motivation for multiple accounts. P3 described the differences between their public and private Instagrams as:

With my locked Instagram, a lot of it is like, dumb college kids things. So, parties and things like that. . . And then on my not-locked Instagram and my Twitter is very like 'model student.' This is what our local university student is like, they participate in all of these events and they're getting really good grades.

Similarly, P8 described their presentation on their private Instagram compared to their public account as, '*It's more who I am at home, versus [as] a professional person*'. P15 had three Facebook accounts with varying levels of privateness but felt that, '*I'm honest on all of my accounts, but it's just the level of honesty.*' By having multiple accounts, users are able to present their identities differently depending on the profile, allowing them to express themselves in a variety of ways.

Another participant had a second, private account to ease the pressure they felt posting on a public account. As P11 described,

With my main, I very rarely post, mainly because posting on the main comes with a lot of, for some reason, pressure, I guess, for me. I feel like things have to be perfect. I have to have the perfect caption, the perfect set of pictures. Instagram, since it's a very photo-centric social media platform, you want to make yourself look a certain way, or make sure you're always doing something that looks interesting.

On the other hand, on their private account, or 'Finsta' (meaning Fake Instagram), they felt more free to post: *'then for my Finsta. . . I have a lot of friends on there who are fairly active. So I'll use it a lot. I use that one kind of just to post my thoughts on things.'* For this participant, having a second account with a filtered network of close friends allowed them to relieve some of the pressure to appear perfect that they felt with posting on a photo-centric platform.

While not every participant maintained multiple accounts on a single platform, most understood that it was an option to create accounts for different types of expression. Some participants did not currently have multiple accounts on a site, but had considered it at one point. P6 contemplated creating a second account that was not connected to her identity where she could share content that she typically avoids on her current account:

I've thought about the possibility of having a second Twitter account because maybe if I actually want to talk about politics and start tweeting more, I wouldn't want anything on the account maybe that could connect it to me. At least that's been a concern in the past.

P10 did not feel the need to have separate accounts because of how they already present themselves online: *'That's just a part of. . . For me at least a part of aging. I don't care to have a separation anymore. So, I think who I am online is who I am for the most part.'* Whether or not participants chose to create separate accounts, they acknowledged that this type of separation in identity presentation could be useful.

Separate accounts for separate networks. Whether a participant had multiple profiles on the same site or differing identity presentation on multiple sites, the network they were connected to on each account played a large role in their account activity. In contrast to their Twitter, which was more public-facing, P4 felt more comfortable sharing on their private Facebook and Instagram accounts: *'I feel a little bit freer because I know that most of the people who are following me there are personal connections. So I think I feel a little bit freer to post whatever I feel.'* P8 also considered their audience when sharing, and described feeling more open on platforms where they were not connected to family members or where there were networks they wanted to avoid:

It's mostly just the communities that are fostered on certain sites that I want to avoid, or like on Facebook, I'm mostly just friends with family members, and I don't necessarily want them to see my 3:00 AM thoughts when I'm sick and bored. No one in my family is on the social media that I do engage with.

Being able to have more control over networks motivated how participants used different platforms. For example, P3 limited who they interacted with on Twitter and Instagram, but had a less restricted network on Facebook:

There's very few people that I will choose to interact with from high school. They're all on my Facebook but not on my Twitter or Instagram for the most part. If they're on my Twitter or Instagram, it's because I choose to interact with them. But on Facebook, I feel like it's a formality, you add everybody you know on Facebook whether you like them or not.

The network that a user was connected to on an account was often the main motivating factor in what their activity on a site was like. To manage this, participants often had separate networks on different platforms or on different accounts on a single site.

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

They don't understand the same way. . . So on social media, like Facebook or Twitter where I have some of my extended family, I'm a little bit more careful about what I post just because I don't want it to be something that I hear about a week later.

However, on other sites where they had a more diverse and larger trans network, *'I will generally post things that are a little bit more in-depth because I know that the people looking at it probably have a little bit better knowledge of what I'm talking about'* (P13). The networks participants were connected to affected what kind and how often identity content was shared.

When participants had a larger trans network, they felt more comfortable posting trans content, like P4, who explained how having trans networks made them feel understood: *'When I gain other trans followers, I know that I can talk about being trans in a way that most of my cis friends on Facebook might not understand'*. In particular, P4 found a network of other trans Asian Americans with whom they shared multiple identities and experiences, and because of that, they were more open to sharing: *'I know that a lot of the people who are following me understand those experiences, so I do talk pretty openly about that there too'*. Participants altered their posting behavior depending on what network they were connected to on a social media platform. When these networks were uninformed on trans issues, participants tended to limit the trans content they posted, but when participants had trans networks, they felt more comfortable sharing about their identities.

Separate accounts for trans content. Participants varied what identity content they shared, especially trans identity content, based on social media platforms and their affordances. By trans identity content, we mean any content related to trans identity (e.g. posts about trans topics and issues, name change, gender marker change). Trans identity content

included both original content from participants and content posted by others that participants then shared to their profiles (e.g. links). Participants identified some platforms as more appropriate for trans content than others. P9 felt most comfortable sharing their identity on Twitter: *'Twitter is kind of my safe haven where I'm like they/them pronouns in the bio'*. The other sites they used lacked affordances they considered central to expressing their identity, *'I would say Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, I haven't found the way for me to bring my caring for other communities to the frontline. . . So I feel those don't really touch my identity as much'*. Because P9 had not found ways to present their support for communities and causes on those platforms, they described that those sites were less connected to their identity overall. P18 adjusted the type of content he posted based on how personal both the account and the content were:

Sometimes supporting, for example, Trans Day of Remembrance, or Trans Day of Visibility, or pride month of June, things like that, that's more public. But when it relates specifically to me and or my transition, that's when it's more private and just the trusted close friends I guess, or other friends that are also in the trans community.

Participants frequently adjusted the type of content they posted based on how personal the content was and how public or private their account was.

Other participants were more likely to share identity content in online groups, rather than on their own pages. P2 kept most of his trans content activity to Facebook Groups: *'I don't really do much of any gender or identity things on Twitter or Snapchat too often. But usually Facebook is where I express my identity the most, but just in certain groups, not outly on my profile'*. P18 also felt more comfortable sharing trans content in groups: *'I go more into depth about certain topics within those closed private groups, where everybody's there for the same reason, so it skips that superficial layer and you can jump right in, to the meat of it'*. Because these groups had specific, often mostly or entirely trans, audiences, participants were more open to sharing identity content. In other more public contexts, participants' networks were more likely to include people who were less informed or less accepting of trans issues and identities, which could lead to participants having to inform or defend their identity to their wider networks. In groups with largely trans audiences, the need to educate others or defend an identity was lower. By having a certain level of shared experience and understanding with private group members, participants felt more comfortable and open to sharing trans content.

Many participants reported creating or having accounts more attuned to their trans identity or otherwise more focused on trans content. When participants were out as trans in some contexts but not others, they often created new accounts to reflect their identity, like P2, who at one time had two Facebook accounts:

I made a second Facebook account. . . when I started coming out socially more but I didn't come out to my family so I had two separate Facebook accounts for about a year and a half before I came out to my family.

A participant's networks played a large role in disclosure decisions as well. Creating a new account was one way to trim down one's network of people who were unsupportive, which is what P2 did:

To weed out all the people who weren't okay with it, it was really way easier to have the second Facebook because then they can friend request me. . . Out of the thousand or so friends I think I had at the time, I only think I have like 200 friends on Facebook now because of that process. And that's so much better.

Similarly, P13 has a separate Tumblr for gender and sexuality content so that there is no unwelcome overlap in networks from their main blog: *'I have a separate blog that's dedicated to gender and sexuality, in which case it's like, the people that are going to find that are already going to be looking for it. So I'm not as worried'*. By creating a separate space for trans identity expression, participants were able to express themselves more freely and with less concern over who may be seeing the content. Maintaining separate accounts allowed individuals to limit trans content on accounts where they were connected to people who were not aware of their trans identities or who were uninformed about trans issues. This way, users could openly share trans content while avoiding the responsibility of educating or explaining it to their networks.

One participant created an additional account because of the inability to change settings on a platform to reflect their trans identity. For example, Snapchat does not allow users to change their usernames, so when P3 realized they would be meeting new people, they created a new Snapchat account:

I kept the old dead name Snapchat probably two years after I transitioned and then I realized I would be meeting a bunch of freshmen. . . that I didn't necessarily have to tell I was trans. . . I realized if they had my Snapchat, they would have my dead name. And that's when I was like I should probably make a new one so that I don't have to explain my username every time I give it out.

Only P3 shared an instance where platform settings motivated their account creation, but it stands as an example of the ways social media platforms can present barriers for trans users.

While participants found alternate accounts to be useful in times of transition, these accounts also came with a particular set of problems. Managing multiple accounts associated with conflicting identities was difficult for P2, who shared, *'Having two different ones were really complicated because I hated getting deadnamed obviously and misgendered in one. And then having to block everyone that would possibly see me and would know'*. Part of this difficulty had to do with how personal he felt that Facebook, and social media in general, was for him. By having separate accounts, P2 felt that he was hiding being trans:

Trying to hide being trans was awful on Facebook. Because when I was learning the most about my identity and who I was, and was really trying to express it in every way I could, and not being able to do that to the world (or me perceiving that I couldn't do that) was crap.

A disconnect in identity presentation across different accounts or offline versus online can make navigating social media difficult or stressful.

In order to create and maintain an ideal social media experience, participants created and managed multiple social media accounts. Every participant had an account on more

than one social media platform and many had multiple accounts on certain platforms (most often Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter). Users then made careful decisions about how they used each account and what type of content they posted based on the platform or the network to which they were connected.

Curating social media experiences

Curating experiences. Participants often actively worked to make their social media experiences enjoyable, typically by avoiding content or networks that would negatively affect their mental health. This curation work was generally focused in two areas: experiences and networks. Seeking to maximize added value from social media, participants followed personally devised guidelines for both the content they consumed and shared. P7 shared, *‘I have some safeguards set in place to make sure that social media will not affect me negatively, disproportionately’* including *‘a very strict no engagement policy regarding any sort of argument or heated discussion’*. P9 employed different tactics toward a similar end:

I don't look at my notifications. In the third tab in Twitter [where Notifications are found on the Twitter app], I try not to look at that until a month after I go on a retweeting spree. . . and that makes it a very positive platform.

For some, these rules were less strict and focused more on self-enforced avoidance, like P13 who shared, *‘I try to unplug as soon as it gets harmful, so I try to get good experiences out of social media and not bad ones. It doesn't always work, but worth a try’*. Similarly, P12 followed more positive accounts to balance the negative content they saw:

I try to moderate how closely I follow politics because it's not going well. . . All of these things are in the real world and worth knowing, but at the same time, it's important to take a break from that when it becomes overwhelming. And so I tried to dilute it with also following artists that I really enjoy or I follow a lot of animals. . . just find ways to chop up and dilute how much real world stuff is constantly coming at me.

In most cases, participants formulated their personal social media guidelines to avoid repeat experiences of previous trauma or harm.

Social media curation helps tailor participants' overall experiences and, to an extent, provides them with greater control over their emotional states as they relate to social media. P2 described his social media experience as: *‘Mostly positive. I try to stay away from the negative ones ‘cause I already have such negative self-confidence. I'm trying to get the good vibes only when I'm on social media’*. Participants' prior social media experiences informed their curation rules with regards to how best to limit their exposure to unpleasant content or activity that would detract from their social media experiences.

Curating networks. In other cases, this curation was focused on the networks that users were connected to on social media. Participants were often quick to unfollow, block, or otherwise limit their exposure to accounts that would negatively impact their online experience. For example, P2 did this by blocking or avoiding invalidating or negative

people or groups: *'I am quick to block anybody on social media if I don't like you easily. I run out of blocks from Grindr daily. I try to only post in groups that are super affirming and positive to other people'*. Similarly, P8 unfollowed or blocked unkind accounts, but they also regularly followed accounts that posted positive content: *'I definitely have been more liberal with unfollowing or blocking people because they post content that upsets me, and I've definitely followed people who post content that I find good'*. This behavior also extended beyond just those who participants were following, to include those who followed their accounts as well. For example, P7 described being discriminant on who they allowed to follow them:

I like to vet the people that followed me for an extended period of time to see if I want to see their content. . . . So, I'm just like okay, so this person has followed me but will they still be following me in two months? And if they are, then I will follow them back, because then they are invested in my personhood.

Participants were also selective with the groups and communities that they joined. When interacting with a group or online community, P10 considers the group's rules: *'I usually won't join a lot of groups if they do not have in their rules like, 'Hey, don't be a piece of shit and don't be racist, sexist, transphobic, homophobic.' That's usually a red flag to me'*. P2 similarly vets groups he is considering joining:

I just look at previous posts and see how the other group members reacted and then see how the moderators reacted to people's negative comments and if they reacted in a way that I think is affirming I'm cool with them.

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

Discussion

By actively managing how they presented their identities, what sites they used, what networks they connected with, and what content they engaged with, trans users tailored their social media experiences to be largely enriching.

Overwhelmingly, users' online networks affected how they presented their identities. Previous research found that during gender transition, people maintain separate networks, allowing them to present different identities to different networks (Haimson, 2018). The same was true for some participants, but overall participants presented a consistent identity across platforms and accounts (e.g. using the same name and pronouns that reflected their identity). What differed were the ways they shared this identity with different networks, particularly when it came to the kind of content they shared (i.e. what kind of trans content they shared and how often they shared it). Building on Andalibi and Forte's (2018) work on network-level reciprocal disclosure, we found that trans users' decisions about sharing their identity also relied on their perceptions of their networks. When participants' networks included people who were uninformed or

unsupportive of trans issues, people they were not as close to, or people with influence over their livelihood (i.e. employers), they limited or were more careful with the type of content that they shared. Participants were typically more open with identity content when their network on an account consisted of close friends and people with similar identities. So, while participants had relatively consistent *identities* across accounts and across platforms, their *content* differed depending on the audience for each of these accounts. Examining trans experiences across participants' social media ecosystems enabled us to understand the complex interplay between these two types of identity presentation. In some ways one's social media content can define one's identity – that is, posting particular types of content is a way to signify what type of person one is and what they care about. Yet explicit identity presentation via markers like name, gender and physical appearance is a different form of identity presentation that we found was more likely to pervade across different accounts and platforms.

Where prior research has centered complications with site affordances and trans identity (Haimson and Hoffmann, 2016; Kitzie, 2018; Nova et al., 2021; Scheuerman et al., 2018), participants in this study did not highlight affordances as a concern. Instead, participants were more concerned with what type of activity they associated with the site, either in what kind of content was shared on the site (i.e. photos on Instagram) or what networks they were connected to on the platform. There are two potential reasons why our findings differ from previous research: it may be that social media platforms' features and affordances have improved, or it may be that users are increasingly finding workarounds for site limitations. Likely, it is a mix of the two. Further research could expand on this work by more directly exploring the question of whether it is site improvements or user workarounds that have reduced users' difficulties using social media sites. Additionally, in this study, participants' geographic, social and linguistic contexts and backgrounds likely influenced results. Thus, our results may differ from research conducted in non-Western contexts and with non-English-speaking samples (e.g. Nova et al., 2021).

With this study, we expand on existing research on trans identity and social media, confirming findings from previous research (Cannon et al., 2017; Cavalcante, 2016, 2018; Farber, 2017) that trans people use social media for a variety of identity work and that this online identity work substantially impacts individuals' identities and offline presentation. Some of our results may be more salient or common for trans populations as compared to cisgender people because of the high stakes associated with trans identity management and the potentially severe consequences of identity misrepresentations (e.g. unwanted disclosure, harassment); however, similar online practices also occur for people with other marginalized identities, such as LGBTQ people more broadly (Dhoest and Szulc, 2016; Hanckel et al., 2019) and people experiencing health conditions (Andalibi and Forte, 2018; Sannon et al., 2019). Previous research on social media ecosystems has found that users make decisions about their social media use based on multiple considerations, including networks and norms, and across platforms (DeVito et al., 2018; Dhoest and Szulc, 2016; Marwick and Boyd, 2010; Xiao et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2016). We confirm and expand on this work by highlighting how trans users in particular manage identity across social media platforms and accounts, finding that when making decisions about sharing identity content, trans people are largely concerned with what networks they are connected to on social media, while also considering what they understand to be the norms of a particular platform. We build on existing research on social

media ecosystems and trans people's social media use by focusing on overall social media landscapes and exploring how trans people strategically use different accounts and platforms in both separate and complementary ways. We also contribute to trans media scholarship beyond social media by examining how the unique ways trans people are represented in media more broadly (Billard et al., 2020) materialize in highly personal, trans-generated social media content and identities.

In considering trans social media use across multiple platforms, our results highlight two unique curation mechanisms. First, trans users curate their own identity presentations to strategically manage who in their online networks has access to their trans-related content and identity markers. Second, trans users curate the content and people appearing in their social media feeds and networks to create enjoyable, trans-affirming social media experiences. In these ways, trans social media users are able to use social media in ways that affirm their trans identities and enable them to find the support, resources and community that is so valuable for improving trans lives.

Conclusion

The Internet and social media provide numerous possibilities for trans identity work by offering avenues for connection and self-education. These possibilities vary in a number of dimensions, and users must approach them strategically in order to build online experiences befitting their desired identity-related experiences. Trans people's social media experiences depend greatly on individual network and content curation. Trans people display myriad online identity presentations depending on platforms and networks. This presentation may look different at different moments in time and may not always align with their current identity. In attempts to ensure an enjoyable social media experience, trans users may take advantage of multiple accounts on a single platform or the different affordances of multiple platforms. They are conscious of what kind of content they share where, particularly when it comes to content related to their trans identities. Further, trans social media users often make strategic decisions about whom they are connected to online, both in whom they follow and whom they allow to follow them. By doing so, trans social media users are able to curate their online experiences so that the content they see, the content they share, and their interactions with their networks lead to overall valuable experiences.


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