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Negotiating trans identities: A discourse analysis of young adults' identity construction on social media

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how transgender young adults use social media to construct their identities in response to known and unknown audiences, both online and offline. Using an approach combining sociocultural linguistics and multimodal discourse analysis, this study brings together analysis of participant social media posts and interview data to both examine and contextualise their social media practices within their wider social lives. It explores how seven participants take advantage of social media affordances to construct positive, agentive identities as transgender people across a variety of online contexts while also navigating the challenges of managing their online visibility and privacy. In addition to exploring how my participants understand and negotiate human audiences online, this study also considers the growing impact of non-human audiences, such as personalisation algorithms, expanding on existing research to explore social media users' relationships with these automated systems.

The findings of this research highlight first the creativity, adaptability, and complexity inherent in my participants' social media practices as they work to construct their identities as transgender people amid an increasingly hostile political climate. My analysis further reveals the nuanced relationships that participants construct between themselves and their online audiences, and the sophisticated strategies they employ to mitigate context collapse. I examine how participants make use of the multimodal affordances of social media to construct vibrant trans and transitioning identities across semiotic modes, as well as exploring the complex relationship they have with social media visibility in both a literal and figurative sense. In explicitly considering the interrelatedness of their offline and online social lives, my analysis provides unique insights into how participants' experiences of marginalisation cross the boundary between 'offline' and 'online' and inform their construction of positive, resistant online identities. Finally, this research underscores the critical role of social media technologies as sites for resistance, community-building, and positive expression, creating space for transgender people to resist cisnormative ideology and construct authentic queer and trans identities.

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1 Introduction

This thesis explores how transgender young adults construct their identities on social media in response to known and unknown audiences, both offline and online. Social media technologies are increasingly integrated into our everyday social lives, and this is particularly true for young adults. While these technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for social connection, this in turn presents a number of challenges. This thesis focuses specifically on issues of privacy and navigating online social contexts in which one's audience is typically invisible and audience feedback may be absent or unclear. As identity construction is relational and informed by the perceived expectations of one's audience (Goffman, 1956, 1986), social media contexts necessitate the development of new strategies to negotiate their relationships to various online audiences. For marginalised people such as transgender people, the stakes are often particularly high; members of marginalised communities often have their identity construction disproportionately scrutinised due to negative stereotypes (Pitcan, Marwick and boyd, 2018) and often feel that failure to conform to dominant norms may hinder wider social acceptance of those who share their identity (Chib, Nguyen and Lin, 2021). This is further complicated by the presence of non-human audiences in the form of automated surveillance, such as the algorithmic systems used to determine the kinds of advertisements we see online or the posts that appear on our social media feeds. In the case of automated surveillance, these systems' decidedly inhuman nature makes these audiences particularly difficult for social media users to conceptualise, predict, and respond to (Jones, 2021).

Despite this, research suggests that transgender people may also stand to benefit disproportionately from social media technologies. For example, transgender people have historically had their access to gender-affirming care severely restricted by inflexible regulatory medical systems. The ability to access information and resources from the privacy of one's home may empower transgender people to navigate medical gatekeeping (Konnelly, 2022), construct possibilities for transgender identity beyond limited medical models (Shapiro, 2004; Dame, 2016; Schudson and van Anders, 2019), or even bypass medical institutions entirely in their route to accessing gender-affirming care (August-Rae, Baker and Buzzanell, 2024). Equally, the unprecedented potential for connecting with others beyond the limits of geographical proximity has allowed for queer communities to form online and has facilitated the construction of alternative social contexts in which transgender people can gather and negotiate the bounds of transgender identity and experience without the need to cater to cisgender audiences (Miller, 2019; Haimson *et al.*, 2021; Jacobsen, Devor and Hodge, 2022).

Informed by the sociocultural linguistic perspective (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), this study makes use of a combined methodology bringing together analysis of social media data from multiple platforms per participant with data from two semi-structured interviews. This dual-pronged approach allows for a more holistic understanding of my participants' social media identity construction in the context of their broader social lives. Incorporating interview data makes visible many of the strategies participants employ in their responses to surveillance, providing insights into how they construct their online audiences that otherwise could only be inferred. This study is also unique in its approach to automated surveillance, contextualising my participants' responses to non-human audiences as part of their wider strategies for responding to surveillance rather than separating them. Although non-human, automated surveillance systems can nevertheless be understood as, in their own way, receiving,

interpreting, and acting upon participants' identity construction. This study examines whether this holds true in my participants' construction of these automated surveillance systems and, if so, how they construct models of and relationships with these non-human audiences to inform their social media identity construction.

Additionally, this study will explore how participants make use of the features and affordances of social media platforms to construct their identity, taking care to understand this within the context of their wider social lives. Inspired by research from the TLANG project (Tagg *et al.*, 2016, 2018; Tagg and Lyons, 2020) and Mackenzie's (2023a) work on connected parenting, I aim to bring together analysis of multiple data types to recognise the interconnectedness and inseparability of my participants' 'offline' and 'online' social lives and identities and to expand my analysis beyond the limits of what can be seen in social media data alone. In acknowledging that 'online' and 'offline' cannot be entirely separated, the question naturally arises as to what extent participants' online and offline identity construction interact and shape one another across contexts, especially given the current omnipresence of social media technologies in formerly 'offline' settings.

The landscape of social media is constantly developing and changing, so this thesis can necessarily provide just a snapshot of the kinds of social media contexts my participants frequent and the strategies they use to navigate them. This is reflected in some of the language used throughout the thesis. For example, the social media site currently known as 'X' is referred to as 'Twitter' throughout this thesis, reflecting its name at the time of data collection (which began in 2021) and the way that both my participants and prior literature refer to it. Similarly, I had in-depth discussions with my participants about their use of platform features, such as Twitter's 'Circles', that have since been discontinued. In the time since this study concluded, a number of participants have abandoned Twitter in favour of the rival platform 'Bluesky', which was not publicly available at the time. Rather than making this study irrelevant, however, this rate of change is precisely why it is necessary to understand the role that these online contexts play in my participants' social lives in order to better understand how these technologies can change to better serve their transgender users, and well as how best to advocate for them in the face of unwelcome developments.

1.1 Research Questions

In order to examine how my participants use social media to construct their identities and how this is shaped by different forms of online surveillance, I have structured my analysis around the following three research questions:

RQ1. How do my participants construct imagined audiences in response to different forms of online surveillance across social media contexts?

RQ2. How does the social media context shape the identities constructed by my participants as transgender people?

RQ3. How does participants' online identity construction interact with their offline identity construction – how is it enabled and constrained?

RQ1 addresses the key issue of audience in informing my participants' online identity construction. This question foregrounds my participants' strategies for constructing their online identities in the absence of a clear audience and considers both human and non-human audiences without necessarily presupposing that there will be a clear separation in

the strategies used in responding to them. With RQ1, I also explore the degree to which participants' imaged audiences vary across social media platforms, if at all, and what factors participants identify as influential in shaping the audiences that they imagine in different online contexts. Drawing on existing research on imagined audiences and the strategies social media users employ to mitigate the challenges posed by invisible and uncertain online audiences (Litt, 2012), I examine how my participants construct these audiences using a sociocultural lens, paying particular attention to the relationships participants construct between themselves and their imagined audiences.

RQ2 focuses primarily on how my participants use social media to construct their identities. This question is concerned with how they take advantage of the different features and affordances of various social media platforms, and the communicative resources made available to them, to construct their identities in ways that may different from offline social contexts, and from platform to platform. Beyond the technological possibilities, this question also addresses how my participants position themselves in relation to contextually salient identity positions, such as positioning themselves as members of relevant online communities. Further, RQ2 aims to examine the degree to which participants make use of context-specific communicative forms such as memes.

My final research question extends the focus further still to analyse how my participants' online identity construction interacts with their offline identity construction. Thanks to the popularisation of the smartphone, it is now possible, even commonplace, to interact in offline and online contexts simultaneously, and an increasing number of relationships exist across both. RQ3 addresses this complexity, exploring how my participants' online and offline identity construction may shape one another. This question seeks to highlight how this blurring and overlapping of 'online' and 'offline' social worlds might create new possibilities for participant self-expression and identity construction, as well as how the relationship between 'online' and 'offline' might restrict the kinds of identity positions available to my participants.

1.2 Thesis Structure

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. Following this initial introductory chapter, Chapter 2 provides an overview of the essential theoretical foundations upon which I have built this study. Beginning with an outline of how identity is understood within linguistics and the constructionist perspective I adopt, the first portion of this chapter focuses on contextualising my study within the broader field of language, gender, and sexuality research. I also introduce the sociocultural linguistic framework that forms the backbone of my analysis. Following this, I turn to how understandings of 'online identity' have developed over time, introducing key theoretical concepts from social media research and how linguists have expanded our research into increasingly multimodal social media contexts.

Chapter 3 outlines my data and research methodology. The first part of this chapter introduces my participants and provides the rationale for this study's focus on transgender young adults. The bulk of the chapter is dedicated to the hybrid methodology devised for this study, combining analysis of both social media data and semi-structured interviews to facilitate analysis of my participants' identity construction across online social media contexts and the relationships between their online and offline social lives. I argue that such a multi-pronged approach is necessary for exploring these issues in a rounded, contextualised way that is sensitive to the interconnectedness of 'offline' and 'online' social life. I also discuss in

detail the process of collecting both social media and interview data, highlighting key ethical and practical considerations in gathering and working with often sensitive data in multiple formats and from multiple sources, including the complexities of striving for participant anonymity when working with public, searchable digital data. Finally, I discuss my analytical approach in more detail, expanding on many of the theoretical concepts discussed in the literature review. Here, I outline how I intend to bring together analysis of both linguistic interview data and multimodal social media data in a unified, streamlined way.

Chapters 4 through 6 contain my analysis. I begin by exploring my participants' construction of privacy and how they position themselves in relation to various audiences in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 is primarily concerned with how my participants' online identity construction is informed by the social media context, analysing how they make use of platforms' multimodal affordances and communicative resources specific to different online social contexts and (imagined) communities. Chapter 6 examines how my participants' online identity construction fits into their broader social lives, highlighting the complex relationships between their 'offline' and 'online' selves and how social media is integrated into their everyday social practice.

Finally, Chapter 7 provides a detailed discussion of my primary findings in relation to my initial research questions, as well as the potential implications of these findings. I also reflect on my methodology in seeking to answer my research questions and evaluate the strengths and limitations of my approach and avenues for future research. In light of social media's rapidly changing nature, I briefly review the changes I have witnessed in the few short years since I commenced my observation and contextualise my findings within this. Ultimately, I argue that there is a need to ensure that the self-expression and community construction I examine in my thesis remains accessible to individuals like my participants in the future, at a time when such freedoms are under threat.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a literature review which presents the theoretical background for this thesis. The first portion of the chapter begins with unpacking the concept of 'identity' in Section 2.2 before considering its role within language and gender research. I then establish both the history and theoretical foundation of the constructionist approach underpinning my analysis and further situate my own research within the field of queer linguistics and, specifically, the emerging field of trans linguistics. Finally, in Section 2.5 I introduce the sociocultural approach to analysing identity in discourse, summarising the five principles around which this approach is built.

The second part of the chapter, beginning with Section 2.6, considers how 'identity' has been conceptualised in relation to online social contexts. I review relevant research concerning online identity construction, highlighting how the technical affordances of social media platforms can influence the identities users construct and the social relationships they form with others, but also how users make use of social media technologies to achieve their social goals in creative, often unexpected ways. I introduce key theoretical concepts such as context collapse and imagined audience that will inform my analysis of how my participants navigate online surveillance. I also consider existing research on online communities, particularly in the context of transgender community-building

2.2 Identity in Linguistics Research

'Identity' is not a straightforward term; even in everyday use, it has a variety of meanings. In a legal sense, identity is treated as singular, objective, and, for the most part, unchangeable, made up of personal information that can be recorded and checked by authoritative organisations such as governmental or financial institutions (Barnard-Wills, 2012). In discussions around politics and social justice, 'identity politics' foregrounds the idea of a shared social identity and solidarity between members of recognisable social groups, usually those who are marginalised (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, p. 28). These aspects of our legal identity and the social groups to which we belong may well play a role when we speak of our identity as individuals, but we are just as often referring to a much more general sense of 'who we are'. Typically, this incorporates aspects of our personality, preferences, and the social roles we play (Lemke, 2008). Identity, in all these common uses, is characterised as an *a priori* truth that exists within us – something we may choose to express or obscure to varying degrees depending on the situation, but which nevertheless stays relatively unchanged.

While this construction of identity may reflect our subjective experience, such an understanding is less useful when setting out to analyse identity in the social world. It is simply impossible for this internal sense of self to be accessed directly. It may only enter the world through discourse (Johnstone, 1996), necessarily shaped and constrained by the communicative resources available to us and which we are permitted to use, at least without negative repercussions (Butler, 1990, 2004; Mullany, 2010). While certain ideological frameworks may be culturally dominant, differing local contexts may have a wide range of differing norms and resources for creating a meaningful identity. The relationships between speakers also has a major impact on the roles an individual may successfully take up in a given interaction (Goffman, 1956); as an example, most adult speakers will instinctively

change their behaviour and language when interacting with young children rather than adult peers (Lemke, 2008).

It is for this reason that identity in contemporary sociolinguistics is understood as something dynamic and constructed in discourse, emerging from local discourse contexts, and continually negotiated in interactions. Discourse here is used to refer not just to language, but more broadly to the means through which we communicate in socially meaningful ways (Blommaert, 2005). That is, discourse concerns not just the words individuals use, but the way in which they draw on the broad spectrum of available semiotic resources to create socially meaningful identities. Following Sunderland (2004), I wish to distinguish between descriptive and interpretive discourses. At times, I will use the term 'discourse' descriptively to refer to communication happening in specific contexts, such as 'transgender online discourse'. At other times, I speak of discourse in terms of broad systems of meaning that structure social life, such as 'dominant discourses' and 'gendered discourse', known as interpretative discourses. Discourses, in this sense, are inseparable from ideology, serving as lenses through which the world is seen that pre-exist individual speakers, but which speakers draw on, reproduce, or challenge, consciously or otherwise, in their everyday social practices. In this thesis, I will be using the definition of identity proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005) in their framework for the sociocultural linguistic approach to analysing identity in discourse (Section 2.5): 'Identity is the social positioning of self and other' (586). This definition understands identity to be inherently relational, only gaining meaning in relation to other identity positions and social actors. Even when we are alone, we construct our identity with and for others, even if they are only imagined (Butler, 2004; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). In the following section, I consider how identity has been explored in sociocultural linguistic research, specifically within the field of language and gender, on which I build my own analysis.

2.3 Identity in Language and Gender Research

The interplay between language and identity is at the core of language and gender research, and the field has progressed significantly in terms of how gender identity is understood, theorised, and studied linguistically. Recognition of language and gender as a meaningful site of academic enquiry is usually placed at some time during the 1970s (Mills and Mullany, 2011), with the publication of and debate surrounding Robin Lakoff's (1973) article and subsequent (1975) monograph of the same name, *Language and Woman's Place*, regarded as particularly influential (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Jones, 2016). In this work, now considered a foundational text in the field, Lakoff argued that there are meaningful differences in language use between men and women, with women's language being comparatively powerless, tentative, and trivial in such a way as to both reflect and reproduce their marginalisation and exclusion from positions of power (Lakoff, 1973). Though some dismissed the text due to its explicitly feminist themes (as described by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003), the issues discussed within the work sparked greater academic interest in the relationship between gender identity and language use.

This early research is often categorised into distinct 'approaches', most notably the 'difference' and 'dominance' approaches (Angouri, 2021). Researchers adopting a difference approach proposed that variation between differences in the language use of men and women may be explained by fundamental gendered differences in the way people relate to language and understand interactional norms, perhaps resulting from differences in early socialisation. For example, Tannen (1990) argues that such differences in adult men and

women could stem from the formation of distinct male and female 'subcultures' emerging from single-sex social groupings of boys and girls in early childhood. Those who favoured a dominance approach attributed these linguistic differences to the systemic subordination of women under patriarchy (Bucholtz, 2004). Although these approaches have since come to be understood as separate and even conflicting, Lakoff's original work treated difference and dominance as interconnected, making clear that she viewed the 'special style of speech' she outlines as not necessarily innate to women. Rather, she argues it is the result of gendered linguistic norms imposed on children from early childhood, leading to reprimands and social exclusion for girls who use language in ways judged to be too assertive, direct, or otherwise 'unfeminine' (Lakoff, 1973: 47).

Later language and gender research has been critical of the assumptions made by much of the early work in the field. Such early research often treated gender as unproblematically binary, with 'male' and 'female' understood as pre-existing, monolithic categories in such a way as to ignore all diversity within them, let alone outside of them (Angouri 2021). Studies usually focused on white, middle-class, heterosexual men and women (Morgan, 2004; Mills and Mullany, 2011; Jones, 2016) and attributed any observed differences in language use to the gender of participants. This assumption erases the influence of other social factors such as race, class, and cultural background and reflects a broader tendency to treat privileged identities as unmarked norms from which others diverge (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004; Trechter, 2004).

Additionally, many in the field began to question the validity of drawing broad, generalised conclusions about gendered language use based on data collected in very specific or limited contexts which often reflect stereotypical constructions of normative gendered behaviour likely to reproduce 'gendered' differences in language use (Cameron, 1992). Such an approach assumed that patterns of gendered language use observed in these contexts would remain consistent over time and space, despite the fact that individuals vary their language use and self-presentation across social contexts and depending upon their interactional goals and relationships with other interactants (Goffman, 1956; Lemke, 2008). For example, if individuals do not typically talk to the supermarket cashier in the same way they would talk to their close friends, it is reasonable to question why patterns of 'male' or 'female' speech should be excluded from this contextual variation.

These criticisms reflected a move towards a more nuanced and complex understanding of gender identity within language and gender research. In treating men and women as homogenous categories, early language and gender research often reproduced essentialist discourses which treat the differences between social groups as inevitable and natural, resulting from innate characteristics inherent to all members of a group due to their biology or culture (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004). It is important to acknowledge that critiques of such criticisms were present even in the field's infancy – in *Language and Woman's Place* (Lakoff, 1975), for example, Lakoff notes that gender differences in language use are not innate or consistent across individuals or social contexts, but correspond to idealised, normative forms of masculine and feminine speech. However, in seeking to explore gendered language *exclusively* through the lens of gender, it is easy to overlook the ways in which speakers of any gender can make use of 'men's language' or 'women's language' selectively and strategically to achieve different goals (Eckert, 2004), as well as those who are excluded from this idealised, normative (and, by extension, raced and classed) model of gender language use (Morgan, 2004). Equally, what might be constitute 'gendered' language

varieties are likely to vary across cultures, which may well be missed by researchers working primarily in white, English-speaking contexts. For example, Ochs (1992) highlighted how language features categorised as 'feminine' due to their use by white middle-class American mothers were not present in the language of mothers in traditional Western Samoan households. While American mothers typically adopted a 'baby talk' register to linguistically accommodate their child and minimise the mother's input in helping the infant achieve their goals, Samoan mothers did not adopt a similar simplified register to communicate with their children; instead, they encouraged them to recognise and acknowledge the contributions others made to assist them. These differences, Ochs argues, likely stem from differences in cultural values and the comparatively prestigious position held by Samoan mothers in family structures, suggesting that 'gendered language' is not consistent across gender but instead understood differently depending on cultural and local norms.

This research by Ochs (1992) introduced a critical concept to the field: indexicality (see Section 2.5 for more detailed discussion). Indexicality refers to the way in which particular linguistic forms become ideologically linked to particular social meanings (Silverstein, 1976, 2003). These links draw on dominant discourses about how different types of language are used – or *should* be used – by particular types of people. Crucially, indexical features rarely index specific identities directly or exclusively (Ochs, 1992) but can be used by different individuals or in varied ways to construct different identities. Oftentimes, the interpretation of a given indexical feature is contingent on social context and requires knowledge of context-specific social norms, shared values, and other relevant identity positions to fully interpret (Eckert, 2008, 2019; Moore and Podesva, 2009). For example, the creative use of language to coin new, alternative gender labels and pronoun sets was associated with authentic transgender identity by some English-speaking transgender communities on Tumblr, while the same features were interpreted as indexing immaturity and an inauthentic 'transtrender'[1] identity by those who define transgender identity in more restrictive, transnormative terms. Furthermore, different social meanings may be activated depending on an individual's own personal values and self-positioning (Agha, 2003; Silverstein, 2003). In the case of gender, the features of what may have previously been discussed as 'men's language' and 'women's language' can be understood as indexing a particular kind of normative masculinity and femininity, part of the construction of one's gender identity as opposed to a consequence of it.

Following from this, much of the language and gender research conducted since the 1990s adopts what is known as a 'postmodern' approach, challenging the idea of a fixed identity and aiming to deconstruct the purported universal, absolute categories characteristic of modern approaches (Cameron, 1992). For language and gender research, this meant viewing gender not as a prediscursive category, but an ideology constructed in discourse and reproduced through learned conventionalised gender performances (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) was particularly influential in this line of thinking, positing that one's gender identity is a *result*, rather than the source, of the gendered behaviours that are attributed to it, brought into being through social action. Though some have taken Butler's model to imply limitless gender possibilities, Butler

[1] 'Transtrender' is a derogatory term used to suggest that an individual is only claiming transgender identity in order to capitalise on a 'trend' despite actually being cisgender. The term is typically used to denaturalise the transgender identities of those who do not conform to dominant gender norms and is primarily associated with intracommunity disputes between transgender people (Konnelly, 2022).

stresses that, though anyone may employ elements of conventionalised gender performances in a variety of ways in performing their individual gender identity, individuals are constrained by dominant gendered discourses that restrict the kinds of gender identities available in a given culture. That is to say, individuals typically negotiate a dominant discourse of gender as a non-overlapping, binary system rooted in biological difference that results in inherent differences in behaviour between men and women. Gender performances that diverge too significantly from these ideals are often subject to negative evaluation or correction – as in Lakoff's (1973) description of a 'rough-talking' little girl – or are rendered simply unintelligible to others, as is often the case with nonbinary gender identities (Butler, 2004). Importantly, despite the pre-eminence of dominant discourses, gendered discourses and the resources they offer for gender identity construction vary across contexts. For example, while dominant discourses of gender position gender identity as inseparable from biological sex, transgender speakers often construct the categories of gender and sex in a more flexible way, facilitating the construction of gender identities that dominant discourses would treat as incongruent or unintelligible, such as 'man with a vagina' (Zimman and Hall, 2009).

This greater emphasis on social context led to the development of methodological and theoretical approaches that allowed for the analysis of language in more diverse contexts or over longer timeframes. This included the use of ethnographic methods to immerse researchers in a particular context, allowing them to observe the way social dynamics play out across more extended periods of time. One concept that proved useful in this regard was the community of practice (CofP), outlined for use in language and gender research by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992). A community of practice refers simply to a group of people who come together around mutual engagement in a shared activity, such as socialising in their local community, working together in an employment setting, or discussing a shared hobby or interest. Over time, these groups develop shared ways of doing things, common knowledge and values, and particular communication habits, known as a shared repertoire of social practices. This can be seen in the way an established friendship group might pepper their conversation with 'inside jokes' and references or refer to particular individuals or objects using nicknames coined within the group, drawing on shared knowledge and experience to establish communicative features unique to that group. Since CofPs emerge when individuals are engaging in shared interests at the same place and time, their makeup is informed by social norms that influence the situations that individuals are exposed to based on the intersections of their own identity. For example, working class individuals are less likely to have access to exclusive golf clubs with high membership fees, while gendered social norms might deter men from joining a dance or yoga group, shaping the membership of their associated CofPs.

A primary benefit of approaching analysis of identity using communities of practice is the way in which the approach facilitates analysis of identity construction beyond macro level categories such as 'male' and 'female.' Instead, focusing on CofPs allows for analysis of how individuals position themselves in relation to other group members and their group in relation to others (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; King, 2019), including how broad social categories are made relevant to the construction and maintenance of individual and group identity. In terms of gender, a CofP approach allows researchers to analyse how gender identities are constructed and negotiated within both single and mixed gender groupings, to what degree and in what ways gender is made relevant, and how membership within particular CofPs can be used to index particular types of gendered identities (Moore and Podesva, 2009; Jones,

2016). Alongside these developments, this more constructionist, context-sensitive approach within language and gender research was also critical to the growth of queer and trans linguistics, which will be the focus of the following section.

2.4 Queer and Trans Linguistics

As language and gender research has continued to diversify, greater scholarly attention has been dedicated to the construction of non-normative identities that challenge dominant gender ideologies. Notably, the field of queer linguistics has grown alongside and often intertwined with that of language and gender research. Queer linguistics grew out of a commitment to questioning naturalised normative assumptions about gender and sexuality (Leap, 2023), challenging the construction of gender as binary and comprised of complementary opposites which serve to uphold normative, patriarchal structures of power (Coates and Pichler, 2023). As such, two of the central ideologies challenged by queer linguistic scholarship are *heteronormativity*, or the construction of heterosexuality as the natural norm or 'default', and *gender binarism*, which constructs the gender binary as natural and positions gender differences as the result of innate differences between men and women (Motschenbacher and Stegu, 2013). Queer linguistics aims to both expose the mechanisms through which these norms are reproduced and maintained and reveal the expansive possibilities for constructing identities and communities that disrupt them (Leap, 2023). Although 'queer' is primarily associated with non-heterosexual identities, stemming as it does from a pejorative term targeting homosexuals (Motschenbacher and Stegu, 2013), queer linguistics is not concerned exclusively with sexual orientations and identities. Instead, queer linguistics understands gender and sexual identity as closely intertwined, recognising the role of heteronormativity in defining the parameters of acceptable gender expression and the role of gender binarism in marginalising all expressions of identity or desire that do not reinforce the construction of binary gender differences as innate, complementary, and non-overlapping. As such, queer linguistics is concerned with interrogating and resisting all discourses that uphold dominant norms of sex and gender.

In recent years, research focusing on how language is used by those who identify as transgender and nonbinary has become a prominent area of queer linguistic study, resulting in what Zimman (2020) describes as a 'trans linguistics'. This is in no small part thanks to the growing number of openly transgender researchers contributing to the field (Zimman, 2021). Although transgender identities were not entirely overlooked in earlier linguistic scholarship, such work frequently centred binary gender categorisations and dominant norms of gender. In these studies, the authenticity of participants' gender identity was often evaluated in accordance with cisgender researchers' perception of trans speakers' 'success' in conforming to masculine or feminine speech norms (Zimman, 2020). Trans linguistics rejects approaches that view transgender identities through a lens of comparison with a 'normal' cisgender population, instead working to challenge deterministic and homogenising accounts of social practice in an extension of queer linguistics more broadly. Rather than defining 'trans language' or seeking to make generalisable claims, trans linguistics highlights the centrality of fluidity and transformation in identity and language, exploring the creative agency trans people display in their language use (Konnelly, 2021; Brown, miles-hercules and Zimman, 2025).

Engaging deeply with the lived experience of trans people also highlights additional mechanisms through which the identities of trans and otherwise gender non-conforming people are rendered illegible and/or illegitimate. The first of these is *cisnormativity.*

Intertwined with and mutually reinforcing gender binarism, cisnormativity constructs gender as equivalent to, or emerging naturally as a result of, one's biological sex, which is in turn understood as both a binary categorisation and a pre-discursive, biological fact. Cisnormativity further foregrounds the immutability of both gender and sex, positioning any changes to one's gender identity or gendered embodiment across time as illegitimate (Borba and Milani, 2017). In a cisnormative view, there are only two possible configurations for 'normal' gendered bodies, and individuals are presumed to be cisgender in the absence of any salient markers of gender transgression (Edelman, 2009, 2014). The second is *transnormativity*, the discursive mechanism which 'structures transgender experience, identification, and narratives into a hierarchy of legitimacy that is dependent upon medical standards' (Johnson, 2016: 465). Like cisnormativity, transnormativity constructs gender as unchanging, though it may be uncoupled from one's assigned sex in the case of transgender people. Instead, transgender people are expected to have maintained a consistent gender identity that does not align with their gender assigned at birth throughout their whole life, having 'always known' they are trans (Konnelly, 2022). In order to be judged as authentic within a transnormative framework, a transgender person's physical embodiment must be the exception to their otherwise normative gender identity construction, privileging narratives in which transgender individuals transition from their assigned gender to the 'opposite' binary gender position. This reliance on dominant norms marginalises those whose identities fall outside of the binary, are fluid, or are otherwise gender non-conforming, as well as those for whom normative gender identity construction is less accessible due to race, disability, class, and so on.

In everyday trans discourse, particularly online, transnormativity is often associated with a related ideology known as *transmedicalism:* a belief system that views gender dysphoria as both a necessary pre-requisite for transgender identity and a mental illness which must be treated medically by altering one's body to better align with an individual's self-identification (Konnelly, 2022). Though the precise definition of 'gender dysphoria' remains contested within trans discourse, transmedicalists typically adopt a narrow definition based upon discomfort with the gendered appearance or functions of one's body and a strong desire to achieve a more normatively gendered embodiment through medical transition. Often, those who espouse transmedicalist views reject nonbinary identities, though some may recognise certain nonbinary identities as valid providing that they meet certain prerequisites, such as experiencing gender dysphoria and wishing to transition both medically and socially (Jacobsen, Devor and Hodge, 2022; Konnelly, 2023). In line with the goals of queer linguistics, a trans linguistic approach works to reveal and deconstruct these normative frameworks while also highlighting the ways trans speakers strategically and selectively invoke and resist them in constructing their identities as transgender people.

With these broad goals in mind, in this thesis I take a sociocultural approach to analysing my participants' identity construction, paying particular attention to how they position themselves in relation to other identity types, including normative ideals. I expand upon this n the following section.

2.5 Sociocultural Linguistics

My analysis of participants' identity construction throughout this thesis draws on Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) sociocultural approach to analysing identity in discourse. This approach foregrounds the dynamic nature of identity as something both emerging from and continually negotiated throughout social interaction. Identity is also understood as inherently relational,

constructed in discourse and only meaningful in relation to other identity positions and social actors. As with other constructionist approaches, this is not limited to contexts in which individuals are addressing an immediate audience, but rather understands *all* identity construction as taking place with and for others, even if they are only imagined (Butler, 2004; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). As I will discuss in more detail in Section 2.8, social media audiences are often invisible and largely unknowable, but users nevertheless make use of a broad range of culturally and locally salient identity types, norms, and communicative practices to position themselves as particular kinds of people.

The sociocultural approach does not prescribe a singular methodological approach but rather provides a theoretical foundation upon which scholars can build according to their own disciplines and the demands of their research questions. The term 'sociocultural linguistics' refers to the 'broad interdisciplinary field concerned with the intersection of language, culture, and society' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, p. 586). The sociocultural framework aims to bring together key insights regarding the intersubjective construction of identity from work across disciplines such as linguistically oriented social psychology, linguistic anthropology, and sociolinguistics, and to organise them into a coherent model. In developing this framework, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) identify five principles they consider fundamental to the analysis of identity in discourse: emergence, positionality, indexicality, relationality, and partialness. Below, I address each principle in turn.

Emergence Principle

The first principle, emergence, aims to challenge the idea that identity is something individual and autonomous, located inside an individual's mind. While not dismissing the importance of an individual's sense of self as an element of identity (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, p. 587), this principle resists the idea that an individual's social behaviour simply reflects their pre-existing self-identity and instead highlights the inextricable role of interaction within social context in constituting identity performance. It is described as follows:

> Identity is best viewed as the emergent product rather than the pre-existing source of linguistic and other semiotic practices and therefore as fundamentally a social and cultural phenomenon.
>
> (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, p. 588)

This idea is generally widely accepted across contemporary linguistic research (Caldas-Coulthard and Iedema, 2008), most visibly demonstrated in cases where individuals use language differently from that which is normatively expected, crossing ideologically boundaries such as gender (S. L. Mann, 2011; Barrett, 2017) and race (Shrikant, 2015). Such cases subvert essentialist assumptions: those which draw ideologically naturalised connections between certain types of social behaviour and an individual's biology or culture, often used as the basis for discrimination between groups. In many cases, however, speakers whose language use noticeably conflicts with the categories they are normatively assigned often face negative evaluation, and frequently violence (Butler, 2004; Lemke, 2008). It is also important to recognise the discursive production of identity even in situations where individuals construct identities that more or less line up with those normatively assigned to them (Butler, 1990). Even identities that are normative and for which there is a

clear social ‘script’ will be constructed differently depending on the requirements and constraints of the immediate social context.

Positionality Principle

The positionality principle aims to highlight the different levels on which identity can emerge in discourse, calling for an expansion of identity analysis beyond macro identity categories such as age, gender, and social class to include locally relevant identity positions and temporary interactional positions adopted by speakers. It is described as follows:

> ‘Identities encompass (a) macro-level demographic categories; (b) local, ethnographically specific cultural positions; and (c) temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles.’
>
> (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, p. 592)

Although some demographic categories such as gender can be argued to be ‘omni-relevant’ (Mullany, 2010), research focusing on researcher-defined macro-level identity categories has been criticised for overestimated the value of such broad identity categories across varied interactional contexts (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; King, 2019). In fact, linguistic ethnographers have demonstrated that speakers often orient more to local identity categories, such as context-specific subcultural or social groupings, than these broader sociological categories (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992). That is not to say that these categories are not relevant at all, but that limiting analysis to such broad categories alone may obscure a complex network of locally defined yet socially significant identity categories that exist alongside or within these macro categories. This idea is well illustrated by Moore and Podesva’s (2009) study, in which high school girls orient towards four different locally-relevant social identities rooted in particular communities of practice – Populars, Townies, Geeks and Eden Village girls – to construct themselves as not only young girls, but particular types of young girls that are meaningful in their social setting.

On the micro-level, attention is also drawn to the interactional roles and stances individuals briefly take up and then abandon throughout the course of an interaction. Stancetaking encompasses three facets: evaluation of a stance object, positioning of a subject (usually the self), and alignment with other subjects (Du Bois, 2007). Positioning can occur along an affective scale, relating to feelings or attitudes, or an epistemic scale, relating to knowledge or ignorance. For example, ‘I’m bored’ positions the speaker affectively, as ‘bored’, while ‘I don’t know’ expresses epistemic uncertainty, positioning the speaker as ignorant. Alignment may be convergent, such as in expressions of agreement; divergent, such as in disagreement; or ambiguous, implied and left open to interpretation. These features are not necessarily all visible in every act of stancetaking, nor are they mutually exclusive – a statement such as ‘I like those too’ encompasses all three facets within a single utterance. Through stancetaking, individuals may take up particular roles in an ongoing interaction. Taking a strong epistemic stance, for example, might allow a speaker to temporarily adopt the role of expert, while another might take the role of ‘supportive listener’ by responding with agreement or approval.

Although different analyses may focus on one of these facets more than others depending on the discipline or methods used, individuals typically position themselves and others across multiple levels simultaneously.

Indexicality Principle

While the first two principles focus primarily on how identity should be defined and understood, the indexicality principle focuses on the process through which identity is constructed in language (see discussion in Section 2.3). The indexicality principle outlines a variety of different ways in which indexicality can constitute identity in discourse.

> Identity relations emerge in interaction through several related indexical processes, including (a) overt mention of identity categories and labels; (b) implicatures or presuppositions regarding one's own or others' identity position; (c) displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk, as well as interactional footings and participant roles; and (d) the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups.
>
> (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, p. 594)

The first indexical process described by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), and the most explicit way identity can be indexed, is the overt categorisation of oneself or others through the use of labels. Ochs (1992) refers to this as 'direct indexicality', wherein there is a direct relationship between linguistic forms and the specific identity categories, such as in the case of 'woman' and 'man' or gendered third-person pronouns. That being said, the use of such labels often offers significantly more information about the identities being constructed than simply that which is contained in the label itself; which categories are invoked and how individuals qualify, evaluate, and/or position them in relation to themselves and others all contribute to identity work (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004). For example, Jones (2018) analyses how a young, working class gay man modified his claim to the identity category 'gay' using the minimiser 'just' to separate his sexual orientation from cultural stereotypes associated with gay men, namely that they are 'camp', positioning himself in contrast to such stereotypical behaviours.

The concept of stancetaking is also useful to capture this additional identity information and describe the way speakers can '[display] evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk' (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 594). Stances can function as 'indirect' indexes of identity where certain affective or epistemic stances come to be ideologically associated with the expected behaviour of certain social categories (Ochs 1992). For example, if cultural norms position men as aggressive and assertive, and women as gentle and unimposing, positioning oneself affectively as aggressive, or epistemically as certain, might come to index masculinity. The same is true for particular conversational roles, such as 'problem solver' or 'active listener'. Over time, particular groupings of linguistic forms and social behaviours can become socially meaningful and recognised as a 'style' associated with a particular category of people. This process is known as 'enregisterment' (Agha, 2003), whereby linguistic repertoires become differentiable, socially recognised, and are assigned social value, functioning as the 'linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups' (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 594) and which users can employ to construct meaningful identities. Such linguistic repertoires can also be used as 'enregistered voices' to invoke a stereotypical 'character' in interaction that is external to a speaker's own identity (Agha, 2005), such as a speaker adopting received pronunciation when quoting a wealthy speaker. The use of these stereotypical characters not only allows individuals to communicate information about another's identity but also allows speakers to evaluate and position themselves in relation to these characters by portraying them positively or negatively (Bell, 2001).

Relationality Principle

The fourth principle is focused on the ways that identities are constructed as meaningful in relation to others. Three pairs of identity relations – or 'tactics of intersubjectivity' - are established in this process, described by Bucholtz and Hall as follows:

> Identities are intersubjectively constructed throughs several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/delegitimacy.
>
> (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, p. 598).

While identity groups are often conceptualised along lines of sameness and difference, with identity groups imagined to be made up of individuals who are alike in some significant way and delineated based on differences between them, Bucholtz and Hall (2004) argue that this is an oversimplified view. They argue that, in a world where individuals can be construed as different or similar in an infinite number of ways, the differences and similarities understood to be meaningful and used to draw boundaries between groups are not inevitable but rather constructed in discourse and rooted in ideological structures. Understanding this process merely in terms of sameness and difference is insufficient to capture the ways in which difference is constructed, and the ideological meaning it is often imbued with.

This sensitivity to the role of ideology and power relations in the construction of identity categories is important, especially for critical researchers. Difference is rarely constructed as value neutral and is instead used to assign ideological value and support hierarchical structures favouring those with greater social power (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004). This is often achieved through the positioning of the more powerful group as the norm against which other groups are measured, becoming less recognisable as an identity over time in a process known as 'unmarking.' Identities which diverge from the norm are highly salient, therefore 'marked'. The ways in which such marked identities differ from the norm can be positioned as deficiencies or moral failings, which may then be essentialised and used to justify social inequality. That being said, discursive constructions of difference can also be a means of enacting solidarity, a prominent example being the construction of 'LGBT+' as a political movement and a coalition of identities defined in opposition to cisgender, heterosexual identities.

Because of the real social consequences of this process, the tactics of intersubjectivity described below draw attention to the active processes through which individuals make claims about theirs and others' identities, as opposed to treating differences as arising from the inherent properties of individuals or groups.

<u>Adequation/Distinction</u>

The first pair of identity relations correspond to the concepts of sameness and difference discussed previously, though the terms 'adequation' and 'distinction' emphasise the active process through which individuals and groups are constructed as alike or otherwise, and resists the interpretation of similarity and difference as pre-discursive social realities (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004).

'Adequation' refers to the construction of groups or individuals as 'sufficiently similar for current interactional purposes' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, p. 599) – that is, adequation does not require identities to be constructed as the same or even broadly alike, merely similar

enough and in such a way as to help a speaker achieve their interactional goals. This is achieved through the foregrounding of perceived similarities considered relevant to an individual's ongoing identity work while downplaying differences that are seen as irrelevant or harmful to this end. For example, Jones (2016) highlights how the members of an LGBT+ youth group in a largely white, working class town drew on racist and Islamophobic discourses to construct their own group identity based both on their shared experiences of homophobia and transphobia, but also distinctly in opposition to the town's South Asian population, who they presumed to be Muslim and, therefore, homophobic. The role of adequation and distinction is especially apparent in the case of one participant who was herself non-white, and had experienced racism in her white-majority community, but nevertheless reproduced racist discourses in her construction of in-group identity with others in her youth group. In this case, anti-Asian and Islamophobic discourses were used construct a 'non-Asian' identity, minimising the differences between her own experience as person of colour and that of her white peers, by constructing and emphasising their shared disdain for the presumed homophobia of the town's South Asian minority.

Authentication/Denaturalisation

'Authentication' and 'denaturalisation' describe the processes through which identities can be constructed as genuine or artificial. Once again, the term 'authentication' is a deliberate choice intended to challenge the assumption that 'authenticity' is a pre-discursive quality inherent to certain identities (Bucholtz, 2003), drawing attention instead to the way essentialist understandings of identity are invoked during interaction to construct some identities as more 'real' than others (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004). Authentication is dependent on group norms and ideological constructions of different group identities, be it broad demographic categories like gender and race or more locally relevant identities related to subcultures or particular communities of practice. Like adequation, authentication involves the foregrounding of particular qualities positioned as fundamental to the identity being claimed while backgrounding traits that may be less situationally relevant or weaken claims to an 'authentic' identity.

To use an example relevant to the construction of transgender identity, it is common for transgender people to *selectively* draw on discourses of gender essentialism in order to authenticate their own gender identities. Though transgender identity challenges dominant cisnormative discourses that equate gender and sex and position gender differences as the result of biological, sex-based differences between male and female individuals, many trans people reproduce essentialist discourses of gender difference through positioning certain behaviours as inherently masculine or feminine to support their own claims to authentic masculinity and femininity (Jones, 2019). This may be true even for individuals who fall outside of the binary, as West, Wada and Strong (2021) demonstrate in their analysis of nonbinary online discourse. In this case, nonbinary Reddit users drew on binary constructions of gender identity and essentialist discourses of gender difference to authenticate their own *exception* to this binary, constructing and disavowing stereotypical models of masculine and feminine behaviours and preferences in order to construct an authentically nonbinary identity.

Denaturalisation involves the subversion of essentialist claims in order to demonstrate the constructed nature of 'natural' identity categories. Research into the performances of drag performers (Butler, 1990, 2004; Halberstam, 1997, 1998; Barrett, 2017) have demonstrated

the ways in which assumptions about the ‘naturalness’ of gender categories can be disrupted and the performative nature of gender foregrounded. Though performance contexts such as these offer the most visible examples of denaturalisation, they may also occur any time an identity subverts ideological expectations. One such example is the reworking of body terminology documented in Zimman and Hall's (2009) analysis of trans men’s language, in which creative compounds such as ‘mangina’ are used to destabilise naturalised links between gender identity and bodily anatomy (see Section 2.14 for further discussion).

Authorisation/Illegitimation

The final pair of tactics concerns the structural and institutional elements of identity construction. In authorisation, an institutional or other authority is invoked in order to legitimate or impose an identity, while illegitimation employs authority to dismiss or construct as illegitimate identities which do not have access to structural power.

Often, authorisation invokes the power of the state, which can authorise identities in a variety of ways. For example, concepts such as legal sex and citizenship present a very narrow scope of identity possibilities in terms of gender and national identity, necessarily erasing the subjective experiences of many. This process is powerfully illustrated in Borba and Milani's (2017) ethnographic work within a Brazilian gender clinic, highlighting not only the narrow, cisnormative criteria that transgender individuals must fulfil in order to have their identity authorised by medical institutions but also its effects on a young trans woman, Estela. In order to recognise a patients’ transgender identification as legitimate, the clinic’s diagnostic standards require the patient to present themselves in such a way as to conform to dominant aesthetic gender norms. For Estela, the clinic’s restrictive understanding of what constitutes a legitimate transgender identity performance fails to accommodate her experience as a transgender woman who does not wish to wear feminine clothing and makeup prior to medical transition due to the risks associated with adopting an ambiguous gender presentation in public. As such, she is forced to find creative strategies for both ensuring her own safety and comfort while avoiding illegitimation at the clinic.

Other institutions whose authority may be invoked include supra-national authorities such as the EU (Weninger and Williams, 2017), religious authorities (Kytölä and Westinen, 2015), or more abstract ideologies. Linguistic markers of expertise, such as specialised registers and jargon, can also be used to construct an authoritative identity (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004). Although the examples given rely on hegemonic authority, this need not be the case. Alternative authorities, including those relevant only to specific contexts and practices, can also be oriented towards, such as those emerging from particular communities, subcultures, or media. Particular communities of practice, for example, might develop their own distinct norms, values, and linguistic markers of expertise as part of their shared repertoire. One example is the the ‘manosphere’, an imagined community of men formed around opposition to feminism and the shared belief that men are systemically disadvantaged in society (Krendel, 2023). While the manosphere encompasses several distinct subcommunities, Marwick and Caplan (2018) argue that they are brought together by a shared system of values and linguistic repertoire that position them in opposition to feminist discourses and rhetoric, much of which has been negotiated in social media contexts such as Reddit and 4Chan. Across the online communities of practice that form the manosphere, it is common practice to theorise and adapt concepts from evolutionary psychology in order to legitimate

their misogynistic beliefs, leading to a litany of community-specific pseudoscientific terms circulating in online discourse (Ging, 2019; Heritage and Koller, 2020). Although the understanding of gender difference promoted by those in the manosphere is rarely rooted in current scientific knowledge, the use of such jargon can be used to construct an authoritative identity and appeal to the values of rationality and objectivity associated with both science and the group's construction of masculinity, distancing their own misogyny from the mainstream construction of bigoty and prejudice as unreasonable, ignorant, emotional, and, therefore, illegitimate.

The tactics of intersubjectivity are intended to provide a toolkit for analysts wishing to examine the intersubjective construction of identity in context, inseparable from the ideologies and practices from which they are built (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004). The list is not exhaustive, nor are the tactics themselves mutually exclusive (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). Most notably, the relational nature of these processes often means that tactics often occur alongside their complementary opposite, such as when a speaker attempts to authenticate their identity by positioning another's as comparatively inauthentic (Shenk, 2007; Jacobsen, Devor and Hodge, 2022; Konnelly, 2023). Rarely, a single individual may enact both contrastive processes at once, especially in performance contexts (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005).

Partialness Principle

Following from the principles of emergence and relationality, the final principle emphasises that identities are multiple, discontinuous and never truly coherent. Because identity is relational – therefore constructed in relation to the interactional demands of the immediate context – even the most intentional displays of identity are necessarily shaped by the interactional and ideological constraints of the particular situation. As Bucholtz and Hall write:

> Any given construction of identity may be in part deliberate and intentional, in part habitual and hence often less than fully conscious, in part an outcome of interactional negotiation and contestation, in part an outcome of others' perceptions and representations, and in part an effect of larger ideological processes and material structures that may become relevant to interaction. It is therefore constantly shifting both as interaction unfolds and across discourse contexts.
>
> (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, p. 606)

In outlining the partialness principle, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) also address the role of agency in identity construction. Rather than characterising agency as an individual's ability to intentionally construct their identity free of constraints, they argue that it is more productive to understand agency as 'the accomplishment of social action' (606). This social action may be intentional but need not be, including habitual actions which have become automatic or unconscious. Further, such a definition of agency allows for 'distributed agency' (606), in which the actions of individuals co-construct identity (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992; King 2019). This means that constraints do not necessarily reduce an individual's agency – rather, a person's ability to work within interactional and ideological constraints to accomplish identity work is, itself, agency.

The sociocultural approach is particularly well-suited for my research due to its ability to integrate with a wide variety of methodological approaches, making it particularly effective in unifying analyses across multiple data types and modes, as in this thesis (a more detailed discussion of my methodological approach can be found in Chapter 3). As these principles

are concerned with the fundamental qualities of and process through which identity is constructed, they remain equally relevant to analysing immediate face-to-face interactions, media texts, and all manner of other communicative modes. This is especially important when analysing social media identity construction, as the features, affordances, and communicative norms of social media platforms vary considerably. However, as I will argue in the following section, there is no clear line to be drawn between 'online' and 'offline' identity construction, but rather our 'online' identities and social lives must be understood as firmly situated within the shared social world. The sociocultural approach, with its sensitivity to the partial, dynamic, and relational nature of identity, provides an appropriate lens through which to explore how my participants' identity construction is informed by the various online and offline contexts they inhabit, as well as the relationships between them.

In the following section, I will turn specifically to the topic of identity in online contexts and introduce relevant theoretical concepts that will inform my analysis.

2.6 Understanding Identity in Online Contexts

In the early days of the internet, online interaction was frequently conceptualised as a means to liberate individuals from the constraints of their physical body and offline identity, where people would be free to choose who they wanted to be and marginalised people could escape social inequality (Turkle, 1995; Nakamura, 2000). For those who shared this view, the text-based nature of online communication had the potential to render demographic categories like race and gender invisible and thus irrelevant (Herring, 1993, 1996, 1999; Vitanza, 1996; Herring and Stoerger, 2014) and allow users to construct and move seamlessly between a multiplicity of identities beyond those they could embody offline (Turkle, 1995).

Although it is certainly appealing to view new technologies as the solution to long-standing social issues, no technology can be separated from the social context in which it is developed and put to use (Barnard-Wills, 2012; Baym and boyd, 2012; Herring and Stoerger, 2014). Firstly, the expense and time commitment involved in being an early adopter of internet technology limited access to those people already privileged in offline life: mostly affluent white men who first encountered the internet in professional contexts (Nakamura, 2000). As a result, the norms of internet social practice had largely been set according to the behaviour and preferences of privileged users long before many of the marginalised users positioned as most likely to benefit from internet communication even logged on. One notable example, explored in detail in Herring's research (1996, 2003), is the way in which aggressive, competitive speech was treated as the norm in online discussion groups, characterised by heated debates, derogatory or obscene language, and personal insults. Though many male users reported viewing this hostile behaviour as harmless fun, many women reported feeling intimidated by such combative interactions and, in turn, being disproportionately targeted when they failed to comply with such accepted norms of language use (Herring, 1999).

Unfortunately, despite much greater equality of internet access, white men continue to dominate positions of power in terms of constructing and maintaining online platforms (Herring and Stoerger, 2014), leading to significant blind spots concerning the experiences of minority groups. To expand on the previous example, a white male forum moderator may fail to recognise the extent of the harm that can result from tolerating such hostile and competitive speech norms (Herring, 1996, 1999) or even overt expressions of prejudice

(Nakamura, 2000). Even where such practices are recognised as harmful, their impact is often ultimately dismissed as less important than maintaining 'freedom of expression', a value central to many online subcultures (Herring, 1999; Ging, 2019; Colley and Moore, 2022). This judgment, of course, ignores the very real silencing effects of such practices, particularly on marginalised individuals attempting to participate in online spaces that are hostile towards anyone who deviates from the dominant norm. In this way, inequalities are often reproduced, rather than erased, in online social spaces.

Secondly, although certain information is obscured, individuals still bring with them an understanding of their identity informed by interactional norms in offline contexts. The idea that the introduction of technologies with new capabilities will lead to widespread and predictable changes in social behaviour is known as technological determinism, described by boyd (2014) as a kind of 'magical thinking' that 'assumes technologies possess intrinsic powers that affect *all* people in *all* situations the same way' (15). Technological determinism greatly underestimates the complexity and nuance of social behaviour and fails to account for the sociocultural context in which technology is situated. Kolko, Nakamura and Rodman (2000) describe this issue in the introduction to their book *Race in Cyberspace*, stating that 'race matters in cyberspace precisely because all of us who spend time online are already shaped by the ways in which race matters offline and we can't help but bring our own knowledge, experiences, and values with us when we log on' (4-5). This succinctly outlines the critical flaw of early liberational views of the internet, which assumed that the structures of inequality that shape offline life can be separated entirely from the individuals that inhabit them. Social categories such as gender and race do not merely reflect the features of an individual's physical body and appearance but fundamentally shape the way they understand themselves and interact with others.

This may be particularly true with regards to gender, which is positioned as so central to who we are that it can be considered omni-present in interaction (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Mullany, 2010) and is often core to how people understand themselves. The centrality of gender as an identity category is reflected online with the prevalence of explicitly gendered usernames despite the opportunity to make gender less visible (Del-Teso-Craviotto, 2008). On social media, it has become commonplace for users to use free-entry text fields on their profiles, such as 'about me' sections, to inform other users of their gender and, more recently, which pronouns to use when referring to them (Thelwall *et al.*, 2021; King and Crowley, 2024). In the case of transgender users, many choose to not only disclose their gender identity, but also explicitly foreground their transgender identity (Webster, 2018). This suggests that, despite the features of computer-mediated communication creating greater opportunities to conceal information concerning social identities such as gender or race, this does not reflect the reality of how internet users incorporate online interaction into their broader social lives, which will be explored later in this chapter.

2.7 Online Identity and Affordances

Though technological determinism has been criticised for its overly simplistic characterisation of the relationship between technology and its users, it would be similarly inaccurate to suggest that the way technologies are constructed has no impact on user behaviour. To explore this, many social researchers adopt a relational approach to studying people's interactions with technology, commonly termed an 'affordances perspective' (Evans *et al.*, 2017). In this view, an affordance mediates between the static properties of a

technology ('features') and what subjects use these properties to achieve ('outcomes') in a dynamic way. Actual use is informed by a technology's features, the individual user's perception, motivation, and capability, and the context of use (Davis and Chouinard, 2016). Evans *et al.* use the example of a smartphone camera to illustrate this relationship:

> a smartphone's built-in camera is a feature, while an affordance is recordability (e.g. the ability to capture images of video of a person, place, or thing), and an outcome could be the documenting of human rights violations.
>
> (Evans *et al*. 2017, p. 39-40)

Affordances, then, can be understood as possibilities for action that frame how users interact with a technology or object, but cannot dictate user behaviour. That being said, technologies can enable or constrain behaviour in a variety of ways, such as through making certain features more or less prominent and certain courses of action more or less seamless (Davis and Chouinard, 2016).

To illustrate this in the context of social networking sites, boyd (2010) proposed four key affordances of 'networked publics', a term used to describe publics mediated by networked technology, referring here to both '(1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice' (39). These affordances are persistence (information shared online remains accessible in the same form long after its original creation), replicability (online information can be duplicated), scalability (online information has the potential to reach massive audiences) and searchability (online information can be easily located and retrieved). To take scalability as an example, a site such as Twitter encourages users to use the site in such a way that their posts may gain a significant audience by making user accounts public by default and enabling easy content sharing through its 'retweet' and 'quote' features for such accounts while restricting certain functions, such as the ability to reply to the tweets of others, for users who choose to make their accounts private. Facebook, on the other hand, encourages users to share posts to a particular audience by setting post visibility to 'Friends only' by default and requiring users to manually change their audience in order to share posts publicly or restrict that audience further. This expectation of different kinds of relationship between a user and their audience in turn shapes how these platforms are broadly perceived and the social norms they have gone on to develop.

2.8 Context Collapse and Imagined Audience

In everyday offline life, individuals typically perform different identities for different audiences that would not, under normal circumstances, overlap, and may, in fact, conflict (Goffman, 1967). For example, an individual's professional identity may have little in common with the identity they construct among their friends, which in turn might be quite unlike how they behave with their parents. In contrast, one significant dynamic often attributed to the affordances of networked publics is 'context collapse' (boyd, 2010), wherein audiences that might otherwise be kept separate in offline contexts are brought together into a single online audience. Situations in which contexts collapse can occur offline, such as in the case of large parties to which an individual's friends, family, and co-workers have all been invited, and these are typically characterised as awkward or embarrassing (Deterding, 2018) due to the difficulty in navigating conflicting interactional expectations. However, with individual websites and forums dedicated to specific interests or activities largely being overtaken by

ubiquitous general-purpose social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (King, 2019), individuals are increasingly finding themselves needing to construct an identity online that is suitable for a range of audiences that otherwise would not cross over.

These challenges are often exacerbated by the fact that audiences online are generally invisible, making it impossible to know exactly who will see, or even *has seen*, a particular post (boyd, 2010; Litt, 2012). This is typically most salient when sharing on platforms such as Twitter, where tweets are accessible to a potentially limitless audience of individuals, with or without Twitter accounts of their own, when using the platform's default settings (Zappavigna and Hyland, 2013). However, even on social media platforms where it is easier to gauge one's *potential* audience, such as Facebook, it is impossible to know who among them may have actually *seen* any given post unless they have chosen to interact with it (Litt, 2012), or if any have shared a post beyond that intended audience (Cho, 2018). This is further complicated by the implementation of algorithmically-driven content personalisation systems on many social media platforms, wherein user data is used to determine which posts appear on an individual's feed based on opaque and ever-changing variables. In such cases, a lack of explicit interaction from a potential audience member is ambiguous. It may simply indicate that they were not online to see a specific update, but it may also constitute meaningful feedback, suggesting disinterest or disapproval on their part. Equally, it may be evidence that the post was deemed irrelevant or low-quality by a platform's content personalisation system and was never shown to that potential audience member at all. Ultimately, a user is left with no choice but to attempt to infer meaning or seek information from external sources.

The makeup of an individual's online audience is influenced by a variety of structural factors, such as what kinds of connections a given platform encourages (e.g. offline reciprocal relationships vs. interest based following) and what control measures or feedback are available to users concerning the actual audience of their posts, as well as individual factors related to the individual's attitudes, goals and their social and technological skills. One key individual factor identified by Litt (2012) is the degree to which an individual is motivated and able to interpret external social cues and monitor and modify their own self-presentation, known as self-monitoring. While users who could be classified as low self-monitors might be more likely to act on internal dispositions and imagine an idealised audience according to their goals, high self-monitors are typically very sensitive to how they are perceived by others and often adopt a 'lowest common denominator' approach, whereby individuals limit posts to only that which they believe will be inoffensive to the broadest possible audience (Marwick and boyd, 2011). This can prove particularly difficult for marginalised individuals for whom aspects of their very identity can be considered inappropriate for everyday conversation, such as queer and trans people (Motschenbacher, 2010) or individuals living with chronic illness (Koteyko and Hunt, 2016). Furthermore, Pitcan, Marwick and boyd (2018) argue that marginalised people may be particularly attuned to how they are perceived by others due to the need to constantly monitor and curate their self-presentation according to how those in power will perceive them in order to avoid discrimination, suggesting that they may be more likely to adopt this 'lowest common denominator' approach and thus experience a silencing effect online.

2.9 Understanding concept collapse using concepts from surveillance studies

The silencing effect caused by context collapse can be understood through the lens of surveillance. Though surveillance might typically be used to refer only to the monitoring of individuals by powerful institutions such as the state (Barnard-Wills, 2012), Marwick (2012) argues for an expansion of the term to cover what she terms 'social surveillance', or focused observation behaviour that takes place between individuals on an everyday basis. This perspective understands power as de-centralised, intrinsic in every social relationship, and enacted in interaction rather than possessed by organisations. Therefore, social surveillance occurs in every aspect of a person's social life, rather than being restricted to specific contexts. For this reason, concepts used to understand the dynamics of perpetual surveillance environments, such as those described by Foucault (1977), can be adapted to describe the social dynamics of social media contexts in which contexts collapse. Notably, Foucault describes how individuals under perpetual surveillance can come to internalise norms and self-regulate accordingly in a process known as 'normalisation'. Even outside of the explicitly hierarchical disciplinary contexts Foucault describes, individuals often feel the need to monitor and adapt their behaviour in response to social surveillance to avoid correction or exclusion. For example, individuals frequently adopt the normative practices of particular subcultures of communities of which they wish to be recognised as a member (Blommaert, 2007), or change how they express themselves to avoid exclusion from a friendship group (Moore and Podesva, 2009). Although social surveillance is typically reciprocal, occurring in contexts where individuals are both observing others and broadcasting themselves to be observed, Marwick (2012) argues that social surveillance nevertheless has a powerful normalising effect on social behaviour.

In online contexts, this normalising effect is most well researched in cases where interpersonal and institutional power overlap, such as behaviour change as a result of the potential for employers (Trottier, 2012; Pitcan, Marwick and boyd, 2018) or university admissions officers (boyd, 2015) to make judgements based on an individual's online activity that could result in the loss of actual or potential opportunities. However, research has demonstrated that users frequently limit their activities online based on the desire to avoid adverse interpersonal outcomes, such as reprimands from parents (boyd, 2014) or negative evaluations from partners (Hernández-Santaolalla and Hermida, 2020). In her research into teen social media usage, boyd (2014) noted that teenagers' social media posts were often the source of family conflict due to parents' lack of knowledge about the norms of teenage online behaviour leading to misunderstandings. Hernández-Santaolalla and Hermida (2020) detail the impact of online social surveillance in romantic relationships, highlighting that the ability to observe and track a romantic partner's connections and interactions with others on social media can contribute to insecurity and jealousy, sometimes escalating to controlling behaviour, arguments, and even breakups. Despite this, the vast majority of their participants admitted to engaging in this kind of social surveillance and agreed that it was 'normal' despite its negative impacts. For both the teens participating in boyd's (2014) research and many of the individuals interviewed by Hernández-Santaolalla and Hermida (2020), knowledge of this observation led to changes or reductions in online social engagement. These examples highlight not only the impact of social surveillance, but how such practices have become normalised within different kinds of interpersonal relationships.

The normalising effect of social surveillance may be particularly strong for members of marginalised communities, many of whom feel additional pressure to conform to dominant

norms in order to distance themselves from negative stereotypes associated with their marginalised identity (Pitcan, Marwick and boyd, 2018). Many marginalised individuals also feel that they are implicitly positioned as a representative of their community by those in positions of privilege, resulting in a feeling of coercive pressure to perform an idealised identity as to not deter allies or hinder social acceptance of their identity (Chib, Nguyen and Lin, 2021). In the case of queer and trans people in particular, this may intersect with and intensify the potential negative consequences of social surveillance within their close interpersonal relationships, such as from friends and family, as they are more likely to be responsible for introducing and educating those in their close social network about their identity (Barbee and Schrock, 2019).

However, the prevalence of social surveillance does not mean that social media users are powerless to resist this normalising pressure, and many social media users have developed complex social media practices to mitigate context collapse as I will discuss in the following section.

2.10 Polymedia

Context collapse is not an inevitable part of socialising online, rather it is a dynamic resulting from the affordances of persistence, replicability, searchability, and scalability (boyd, 2010), facilitated by different platforms with different features to different degrees. That being said, motivated users continue to find creative ways to achieve separation between different online social contexts and audiences.

The different affordances of various platforms encourage or discourage particular social behaviours and facilitate or constrain particular types of identity construction. As a wide variety of online communicative technologies become increasingly available, accessible, and affordable, Madianou and Miller (2013) argue that a polymedia environment has emerged. In polymedia, factors such as cost and technical skill become less significant in determining the communicative media used by individuals. Instead, the focus shifts increasingly to how the features of different technologies best facilitate different communicative needs, as well as the social, emotional, or moral consequences of this choice. This theory of polymedia is useful to analyse the distinctions made within communicative media, such as between different social media platforms. Since social media platforms can typically be accessed for free using an internet browser or mobile app, the choices made between individual platforms are unlikely to be influenced by cost of access, which places greater emphasis on the platforms' varying affordances, social context, and users' communicative goals. For example, though a transgender user may be able to circumvent Facebook's 'real name' policy without detection, they may decide that an alternative platform that offers a greater degree of anonymity and customisability would be more suitable to their goal of constructing their transgender identity on social media (Cavalcante, 2019; Haimson, Dame-Griff *et al.*, 2021).

In a polymedia environment, it is also common for users to make use of multiple social media platforms to meet different communicative needs (Keller, 2019) and mitigate the challenges of context collapse (Costa, 2018). This 'platform hopping' behaviour can be particularly important for queer people who are closeted, stealth, or otherwise do not wish to be 'out' in all social contexts, as they can make use of platforms which require minimal connection between online and offline identity as an outlet to express queer identity and connect with queer communities while separating this from accounts that contain identifying

information (Cho, 2018; Cavalcante, 2019). Though the use of multiple accounts on and across platforms can offer more flexible options for identity construction, it can be labour intensive. Users wishing to do so effectively must be meticulous about limiting information that could be used to identify them across platforms (Hanckel *et al.*, 2019), monitor any crossovers in audience across profiles (Cho, 2018), and develop an awareness of the ways algorithmic systems can use metadata, such as smartphone GPS data, to make connections and carry identity information across online contexts (boyd, 2014). These difficulties can result in increased stress, particularly for queer users who fear being outed in unexpected or unsafe contexts (Haimson *et al.*, 2015), and cannot entirely reduce the risks of alternate profiles being found by or shared with hostile audiences (Cho, 2018).

Social and cultural factors also play a significant role in influencing decisions between platforms in a polymedia environment, as social media platforms accrue association over time that sediment into norms regarding what kinds of people use them and for what purposes (Davis and Chouinard, 2016), often informed by how a platform's affordances shape social behaviour. Historically, Tumblr's permissive approach to queer and erotic content, its robust tagging system, and the high level of customisation enabled on user blogs facilitated queer expression and connection (Renninger, 2015; Cavalcante, 2019; Haimson *et al.*, 2021), which in turn led to the site gaining a reputation as a hotspot for queer communities (Cho, 2018; Keller, 2019). In contrast, 4chan's dedication to maintaining user anonymity and 'free speech' fostered an environment where users could express extreme or hateful sentiments without fear of censorship or reputation damage. This led to its reputation as a haven for online extremist movements such as the alt-right (Herring and Stoerger, 2014; Scheuerman, Branham and Hamidi, 2018; Ging, 2019; Colley and Moore, 2022), and discouraged marginalised users, especially racial minorities, from attempting to use the site (Davis and Chouinard, 2016). As these examples demonstrate, while a technology itself does not *dictate* user behaviour, a platform's affordances can promote particular kinds of interaction that fulfil different communicative purposes, influencing the kinds of users it attracts and retains and, often, establishing it as a home for particular kinds of online communities.

2.11 Online Communities

Both the structural affordances of a platform and its cultural associations shape the way its users interact and relate to each other socially, the degree to which they form communities, and how those communities are organised. The concept of online communities has been somewhat controversial, despite many internet users reporting feeling a strong sense of community with others participating in the same online social spaces (Baym, 1999). Some of the disagreement about whether online social groups should be labelled as 'communities' results from ambiguity and inconsistencies in the way 'community' is defined across disciplines and by individual scholars, with some definitions specifying a requirement for communities to be created around a shared physical location, necessarily excluding most online communities (Parks, 2010). Other definitions of community, such as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992) communities of practice, are more concerned with interpersonal relationships, a sense of belonging, and shared social practices, though issues with applying the term to groups of internet users still persist among such scholars. This is largely due to the diversity in online social groupings to which the term might be, or is colloquially, applied.

On the one hand, a group of players forming an informal team in a multiplayer online game and subsequently connecting regularly online to play matches and socialise without ever

meeting on another could be considered a community of practice according to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992) definition. In this case, these individuals would be habitually coming together to engage in a shared activity, forming a shared repertoire of social practices and sense of collective identity much like we might expect of an offline community. On the other hand, the term 'community' is frequently used by the marketing team of social media platforms to describe those who use it as a collective (Parks, 2010). In this case, the term 'community' is significantly less analytically useful. It is true that the users of a given social media platform do all engage in the same broad category of activity (e.g. using the platform in some form), and many users may have a generalised idea of what it means to be, for example, a 'Twitter user' that they feel they share with others on the platform. However, the sheer number of users - many of whom do not even share a language - makes it impossible to discern meaningful shared activities, interests, norms, or values shared by a platform's userbase as a whole.

In the case of large social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter, Parks (2010) argues that they are best conceptualised as social venues where communities might form, more akin to physical gathering places in the offline world than communities in their own right – similar to the concept proposed by boyd (2010) of networked publics. Following a review of the literature about communities, Parks (2010: 109) proposed five 'defining elements of community' that can serve as criteria for evaluating the extent to which online groups function as online communities, which are as follows:

- Ability to engage in collective action
- Shared rituals, social regulation
- Patterned interaction among members
- Identification, a sense of belonging and attachment
- Self-awareness of being a community

This definition is notably similar to that of communities of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992), suggesting that this framework may be effectively applied to online communities: I refer to these here as 'online communities of practice'. According to these criteria, a variety of different online groups could be considered a community, including those that are organised somewhat loosely, such as the informal groups that emerge online dedicated to particular identities (Dame, 2016; Jacobsen *et al.*, 2022), interests or 'fandoms' (Bourlai and Herring, 2014; McInroy, 2020), and hashtag campaigns (Ince, Rojas and Davis, 2017; Ray *et al.*, 2017; Clark, 2019; Clark-Parsons, 2021; Sobande, 2021). However, simply maintaining an account and engaging with social media does not automatically constitute participation in an online community as individuals use social media for a variety of purposes, many which may have little to do with social interaction (Parks, 2010).

In addition to groups that can be labelled as 'online communities of practice' relatively unproblematically, Heritage and Koller (2020) argue that some online communities, such as the 'subreddit' (a kind of themed discussion forum on the social media site Reddit) they researched, blend features of an online community of practice with those of imagined communities (Anderson, 1983). In an imagined community, individuals imagine themselves to be members of a community of thousands or millions with whom they share an identity or values but will likely never meet. Subreddit communities, similar to those that emerge on other topic-based forums, are groups of people who come together to discuss a specific shared interest, developing a repertoire of shared knowledge, values, linguistic practice,

norms of behaviour, and perception of themselves as a community, much like communities of practice (Heritage and Koller, 2020). However, like imagined communities, these groups are often so large that it would be impossible for each individual to know, interact with, or understand their place in the group relative to every other individual in their community. This hybrid form of imagined community and community of practice is frequently found across contexts online, revealing how social media can challenge our existing constructions of 'community' and how it is often necessary to combine multiple frameworks to capture these complexities.

While interest-based communities like subreddits or 'fandoms' (online imagined communities of fans of particular interests or media properties) often emerge and develop slowly over extended periods of time, other online social groupings can form and grow to significant size in a comparatively short time span. This is often in response to specific memes/trends among a platform's users (Dame, 2016) or events/issues reported in the media and/or publicised on social media (Ince, Rojas and Davis, 2017; Clark, 2019; Clark-Parsons, 2021; Sobande, 2021). These social groupings are usually ephemeral, but nevertheless meet the criteria to be considered an online imagined community: recognisable patterns and norms emerge rapidly (Ray *et al.*, 2017; Bouvier, 2020, 2022); individuals quickly come to identify with the group as a distinct identity (Yadlin-Segal, 2019; Clark-Parsons, 2021); users act collectively to achieve the group's goals (Ince, Rojas and Davis, 2017; Ray *et al.*, 2017; Anderson *et al.*, 2018; Clark, 2019; Nartey, 2021). It is important to note, however, that as the activities of these communities are usually public and visible to all users on a given social media platform, not all individuals who interact with community posts or contribute to community discussions can be considered a member. Indeed, some and may even seek out hashtags used by these communities in order to criticise or mock community members (Dame, 2016).

Though not a concern exclusive to online communities, cases like those described above demonstrate how the boundaries between engagement in an online community and other types of online social behaviour can become blurred and difficult to distinguish. While some hashtags attract and help to organise communities with distinct identities and norms, such as #trans on Tumblr (Dame, 2016), this is certainly not true of all hashtags, even those used regularly by a large number of users. Zappavigna's (2014) research explores how users use hashtags such as #coffee to index particular identities and invite others to align with them around a shared stance (e.g. enjoying coffee, being hardworking) in an 'ambient' way, without the need for direct interaction between participants. While the tweets in the #coffee hashtag might demonstrate patterned behaviour, such as frequent tweets about coffee as a part of a morning routine, the tweets in Zappavigna's corpus primarily serve to communicate information about a user's identity. Here, #coffee can be used to index various identities such as 'coffee addict' or 'coffee connoisseur', but these do not appear to be understood by users as community identities. As in offline life, however, exactly how groups are categorised as communities or otherwise is not always clear cut (Parks, 2010) and can be especially complicated when dealing with more informal groupings within larger, publicly accessible social media platforms.

One high profile example of an online imagined community of practice that has received significant media attention is 'incels', a sub-community within the manosphere (see discussion in Section 2.5). The term 'incel' is short for 'involuntarily celibate' and has been adopted by an imagined community within the manosphere who attribute their difficulties in

finding romantic and sexual partnerships firstly to feminism, which they believe has unjustly restricted men's access to heterosexual connection (Aulia and Rosida, 2022), and secondly to women, who they position as shallow, manipulative, and inferior to men (Heritage and Koller, 2020). Though initially a niche online community, incels became a mainstream media talking point following a number of terror attacks committed by those who espoused incel ideology (*BBC News*, 2021; Townsend, 2022; Bisset, 2023). The unique language of incels has also drawn popular media curiosity, with guides to recognising incel terminology amongst otherwise innocuous youth slang terms published by widely-circulated tabloid such as *The Daily Mail* (Sachdeva, 2025).

Research into the manosphere has similarly highlighted the central role of language and discourse in constructing this shared identity and effectively communicating ideological stances, with manosphere terms such as 'incel' and 'Chad' (a term used to index hegemonic masculine identity, often with particular emphasis on physical fitness, conventional attractiveness, and sexual success) having entered the mainstream through memes (Aulia and Rosida, 2022). In this way, a worldview in which women are objectified and positioned as conquests through which masculinity may be measured is communicated effectively and widely by these men. In the case of queer and trans people, social media communities have been at the forefront of developing new terminology to allow queer people to communicate their experiences and connect with others (Dame, 2016; Schudson and van Anders, 2019), challenging cissexist ideological links between bodily terminology and gender (Zimman and Hall, 2009; Edelman and Zimman, 2014; Webster, 2018), and subverting and refiguring grammatical gender to express nonbinary identities in binary grammatical gender systems (Zimman, 2019). The positive potential of online community building for transgender social media users will be discussed in more detail in the following section, including specific examples of some of the linguistic developments such communities have fostered.

2.12 The Queer/Trans Internet

The potential for the internet to facilitate organisation and community building has been realised by members of the queer community since the dawn of the internet (Shapiro, 2004), with early queer pioneers using new technologies to distribute materials related to LGBT+ activism and organisation, share queer pornography, and create chatrooms, forums, and contact databases to help queer people connect online (Gross, 2003; Cavalcante, 2019). Whereas visiting gay bars or similar venues, attending offline support groups, or even receiving newsletters or magazines in the mail brought significant risks of identity exposure, the internet presented an opportunity for queer individuals to gather information and explore their identity from the relative privacy of their own home, without the need to associate their online activity with their offline identity (Shapiro, 2004; Marciano, 2014; Cannon *et al.*, 2017). For many queer people, including those living in rural and/or conservative areas with no visible queer community presence (Gross, 2003) or young people lacking parental support (Jenzen, 2017; Scheuerman *et al.*, 2018), the internet offered a route to learning about and exploring queer identity and culture where offline alternatives may not be safe or accessible.

However, a lack of widespread internet access and the specialised knowledge required to create and host a website still posed severe limitations on who could participate in early internet 'homepage culture'. In the years since, the financial and technical barriers to entry have diminished significantly due to the proliferation of interactive, easy-to-use social platforms and the increasing affordability of the technology required to get online (Madianou and Miller, 2013). Blog hosting sites and social media platforms in particular have turned the

act of sharing one's own perspectives online into an everyday activity for growing numbers of people (Papacharissi, 2010a, 2010b; Marwick, 2013; boyd, 2014). These 'new media' technologies offer an alternative means through which perspectives and voices underrepresented in mainstream or 'old media,' such as newspapers or television, can potentially reach a broad audience (Papacharissi, 2014; Anderson *et al.*, 2018). The visibility, searchability, and scalability afforded by social media, in particular, combined with features such as hashtags, mean that content has the potential to spread rapidly through online social networks (boyd, 2010) and build momentum through reposting, remixing, and additional contributions made by other users (Georgalou and Hyland, 2017), raising awareness of marginalised identities and experiences in public discourse while also helping marginalised individuals connect with one another across geographical boundaries.

The impact of this new opportunity for resource sharing was especially pronounced for transgender people due to their relative invisibility in the media (Cavalcante, 2016), the classification of transgender identity as a medical disorder (Borba and Milani, 2017; Borba, 2019; Konnelly, 2021), and the inherent danger in publicly transgressing dominant gender norms (Turkle, 1995; Barbee and Schrock, 2019). Historically, many transgender people had no access to information about transgender identity prior to disclosing their experiences and struggles with their gender identity to a medical professional (Shapiro, 2004; Marciano, 2014), a particularly challenging barrier to overcome for transgender individuals who, due to the lack of available information and representation in mainstream media, lacked the knowledge or vocabulary to describe their experiences in terms of transgender identity and/or gender dysphoria. Further, the model of transgender identity accepted by medical institutions relied (and, often, continues to rely) upon a narrow, inflexible narrative of transgender identity that prioritised adherence to gender norms and passing as cisgender, thereby failing to accommodate gender non-conforming and nonbinary transgender identities whatsoever (Borba, 2015, 2017, 2019; Borba and Milani, 2017; Miller, 2019; Konnelly, 2021).

Today, many transgender people's first exposure to information about transgender identity is the result of independent online research (Zottola *et al.*, 2021). Online, it is not only possible to access information that was previously restricted by medical gatekeeping, but also to access resources created by transgender people, such as blogs (Vivienne, 2017), 'vlogs' (Dame, 2013; Raun, 2015a, 2015b; Etengoff, 2019; Jones, 2019; Miller, 2019), and contributions to various websites, forums, and chatrooms catering to transgender people (Marciano, 2014; Cavalcante, 2016; Mackenzie, 2017; West, Wada and Strong, 2021). While access to many of the resources and services required to pursue gender-affirming medical care or legal recognition of gender transition continue to be restricted and controlled by institutions that lack adequate understanding of transgender identity and experience (Barbee and Schrock, 2019; Webster, 2019), the exchanging of information, experiences, and advice between trans people can be a vital resource for individuals seeking to navigate these institutions and effectively advocate for themselves (Mackenzie, 2017). For example, many transgender people find it necessary to perform a binary gender identity that adheres closely to gender norms in order to access gender-affirming medical care such as hormone therapy or surgeries (Konnelly, 2021), leading to trans people sharing advice based on their own experiences of constructing gender identities and life narratives that align with medical professionals' expectations (Butler, 2004; Zimman, 2020). Similarly, transgender individuals can face unique problems with acquiring accurate and consistent documentation, often relying on the expertise of other trans people to navigate complex bureaucratic systems or

find workarounds to systems that do not account for complex or changing identities (Mackenzie, 2017).

2.13 Online Transgender Communities

For trans people specifically, socialising online may also be particularly appealing for many of the same reasons early internet theorists such as Turkle (1995) argued digital communication would benefit marginalised people, namely the ability for individuals to obscure or minimise many of the bodily cues used in attributing gender to others (DeHaan *et al.*, 2013; Marciano, 2014), including those which might otherwise be difficult to alter, such as body size and vocal pitch (Ericsson, 2018; Zimman, 2019). Though these affordances failed to make gender irrelevant online, they can aid transgender people in attempting to 'pass'[2] – that is, construct their gender identity in a way that is recognised by others – by reducing the salience of physical cues typically privileged in the process of gender attribution in interactions (Westbrook and Schilt, 2014; Zimman, 2019). Although passing is not desirable or attainable for all transgender people (Edelman, 2009, 2014; Brumbaugh-Johnson and Hull, 2018), doing so is often necessary to minimise the risk of transphobic harassment or violence (Turkle, 1995; Marciano, 2014). Even for transgender individuals who have been able to achieve a normative gender presentation and are able to construct their gender identity without question in their day-to-day lives, certain unchangeable physical features, such as height, can result in persistent anxiety that they might be 'clocked' (recognised as transgender) and experience invalidation, harassment, and/or discrimination as a result (Edelman, 2009, 2014; Brumbaugh-Johnson and Hull, 2018). Because many online social media platforms allow individuals to construct their identity in a primarily text-based and/or asynchronous way, individuals are able to curate what they choose to share and achieve significantly more control over their identity performance than can be achieved in face-to-face communication (DeAndrea and Walther, 2011; Walther *et al.*, 2015; Hardaker and McGlashan, 2016). For transgender users who wish to, such features can be used to limit the visibility of physical traits that may complicate the task of 'passing' or trigger gender dysphoria, increasing their ability to construct an unmarked identity.

However, not all transgender internet users wish to leave their transgender identity in the offline realm; many wish to use the internet as a way to safely explore their gender and connect with others like them. To this end, the internet has facilitated the emergence of transgender communities, both large imagined online communities and more close-knit online communities of practice. Whether organised around websites designed specifically for trans community building (Zimman, 2014; Cavalcante, 2016), forums, groups, and

[2] The term 'passing' can be a point of discomfort among some trans people as it can easily be used to denaturalise one's gender identity; to say that a trans man is 'passing' as a man, for example, implies that he is not *actually* a man, despite successfully appearing as one (Edelman 2009; 2014). This is not my intention when using the term throughout the thesis, nor do I believe this reflects my participants' intentions in their use. Passing, as used by myself and my participants, is primarily used to suggest that one is being perceived as cisgender. While this typically involves being perceived as a cisgender person of the same self-identified gender, some participants also extended the idea of 'passing' to being perceived as their assigned gender when this benefited then. For example, one of my nonbinary participants often used the term to refer to being perceived as male in situations where they had chosen to remain closeted. As such, the notion of 'passing' can be understood as successfully being perceived as cisgender in line with a transgender person's intentions, with the precise meaning of this shifting alongside an individual's social goals. Ultimately, 'passing' should be understood here primarily in terms of a participant's ability to construct an *unmarked* identity that aligns with their social goals in a given situation.

chatrooms (Marciano, 2014; West, Wada and Strong, 2021), or more informally clustered around particular hashtags (Dame, 2016; Haimson *et al.*, 2021) or social media creators on larger social media platforms (Dame, 2013; Tortajada *et al.*, 2021), these online transgender communities often function as 'virtual counterpublics' (Renninger, 2015; Jenzen, 2017; Schudson and van Anders, 2019). In these spaces, dominant discourses regarding sex and gender are challenged and the needs, experiences, and varied identities of transgender people are centred. For example, the norms of interaction in such communities often position the individual as the sole authority in determining their own gender identity and which pronouns and/or terminology are appropriate to use in describing them (Zimman, 2017, 2019; Yuen, 2024) rather than attributing gender based on bodily appearance or legal designation. In this way, they allow transgender individuals who are closeted or otherwise unable to transition in their offline life to socialise in online contexts where their identity will be recognised. Further, many communities challenge the cisnormative expectation that gender identity is (or ought to be) static and unchanging over time, creating community norms amenable to identity exploration, experimentation, and the construction of fluid gender identities (Vivienne, 2017; Cavalcante, 2019; Haimson *et al.*, 2021). Language plays a key part in this process, particularly the language used to construct and label transgender identities.

2.14 Transgender Online Language

Transgender virtual counterpublics create opportunities for large, geographically disparate transgender communities to discursively 'work out' issues of identity and community through language (Renninger, 2015). Transgender experiences often bring into sharp relief both the role of language in constructing and articulating gender identity and the essentialist assumptions underpinning the way gender is commonly talked about (Zimman and Hall, 2009; Webster, 2019). As a result, transgender communities are frequently actively engaged with metalinguistic commentary and developing community linguistic practices that allow for the articulation and recognition of complex, non-binary, and non-normative gendered identities and experiences (Zimman, 2014, 2017, 2020, 2021).

One example demonstrating how linguistic practices might be reconfigured in online discourse can be found in Zimman and Hall's (2009) investigation of the way transgender men use genital terminology on a transgender discussion site. By separating physiological function from gender in the use of both normatively masculine and normatively feminine gender terminology, the site's users resist the assumption that particular physical characteristics are innately gendered. The trans men in this study frequently adopted vernacular terms typically used to describe a penis, such as 'dick', to refer to their own external genitalia, reworking such terms to refer to all male genitalia regardless of function or appearance. This word choice foregrounds the term's gendered meaning, constructing trans men as unambiguously 'male-bodied' and reflecting an understanding that a body's gendered meaning is determined by the gender identity of the individual that inhabits it, rather than the other way around (Zimman, 2014). Additionally, in the example of 'dick', the use of this terminology may also emphasise bodily changes that occur following treatment with testosterone, namely clitoral enlargement, further challenging the cisnormative position that sex is binary and unchangeable by foregrounding the ways in which gender transition blurs the constructed binary between 'male' and 'female' anatomy. In this way, trans men can resist illegitimating discourses and position themselves as both unambiguously male and

sexually agentive and desirable through creatively reworking the ideological associations upholding language use.

In addition to reformulating how existing language is used and interpreted to better reflect transgender identity and experience, online trans spaces often facilitate the development of new vocabulary to address linguistic gaps that might prevent or complicate the articulation of transgender identities (Renninger, 2015; Dame, 2016; Schudson and van Anders, 2019; Jacobsen, Devor and Hodge, 2022). Zimman (2020) describes the way in which speakers of languages with grammatical gender systems use strategies such as blending forms or adding morphemes to express nonbinary identities. For example, he describes German-speaking internet users coining of the neutral pronoun *xier* as a combination of the gendered pronouns *sie* (she) and *er* (he), as well as the practice of inserting the morphemes *-x* or *-e* to Spanish words in place of the gendered *-a* or *-o* when referring to individuals whose gender in nonbinary or not specified. Though these forms are primarily seen in digital spaces and are not yet in mainstream use, they provide an example of how transgender speakers can extend existing language systems to better accommodate them.

In a similar vein, research has indicated that queer online counterpublics often give rise to the proliferation and co-construction of new gender identity categories and labels intended to describe experiences of gender and sexuality that are typically erased by hegemonic discourses (Renninger, 2015; Dame, 2016; Schudson and van Anders, 2019; Jacobsen, Devor and Hodge, 2022). For many queer and trans people, finding the vocabulary to describe their experiences is an important part of negotiating their identity as a valid way of being and making it intelligible to themselves and others (Ryan, 2019; West, Wada and Strong, 2021; Crowley, 2025). However, individuals with nonbinary or otherwise non-normative gender identities often find that they have no available language with which to communicate their identity. Whereas people tend to have a broad cultural understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman, the term ‘nonbinary’ flattens a huge range of possible experiences with gender (or lack thereof) into a single category defined only by its deviation from the binary (Butler, 2004). As a result, many nonbinary people feel unable to describe their gender identity with the language available, resulting in a desire to establish new gender identity categories, sometimes known as ‘neogenders’ or ‘xenogenders’ (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2022). Often, these terms describe identities according to their relationship with binary gender categories in a similar, yet more descriptive, way to ‘nonbinary’, including popular terms such as ‘demiboy’ and ‘demigirl’ that have been somewhat adopted in mainstream use (Schudson and van Anders, 2019). Others adapt prefixes used in more widely-known labels for sexualities, such as in ‘bigender’, a term describing identifying with both masculinity and femininity simultaneously (Dame, 2016), or ‘agender’, describing an lack of identification with gender entirely (Zimman, 2020). This creative reworking of existing terminology and affixes draws on presumed shared linguistic knowledge to index particular information about previously unlabelled gendered identities in a way that aims to be somewhat legible to those encountering the terms for the first time.

In other cases, individuals reject existing models of gender and seek to define their genders without reference to existing categories of gender or sexuality, using the Greek prefix ‘*xeno*’, meaning ‘strange’ or ‘foreign’ to describe such experiences under the umbrella category of ‘xenogenders’ (Beattie *et al.*, 2018; Barbeau *et al.*, 2022). In labelling these identities, individuals typically draw on inhuman metaphors to convey gendered experience, usually using descriptive labels such as ‘catgender’ or ‘stargender’ (Jacobsen, Devor and Hodge,

2022) and occasionally coming up themed sets of neopronouns such as ‘nounself’ pronouns (e.g. cat/cats/catself). Those who use xenogenders entirely reject existing frameworks for understanding gender, which makes their validity as gender identity labels particularly controversial within online transgender communities. For example, Dame (2016) demonstrates how the coining and popularisation of various neogenders, xenogenders, and neopronons factors into ongoing debates online about what it means to be transgender. His research highlights how a particular hashtag, ‘#bun pronouns’, became a ‘micro-meme’ on the social media platform Tumblr as part of the debate surrounding the validity of xenogenders, with critical users parodying the use of ‘nounself’ pronouns and questioning the validity of neo- and xenogenders as a whole. In this way, discussion of these new gender identities leads to further ‘working out’ of the boundaries of the collective transgender identity category (Renninger, 2015), reflexively negotiating the parameters of the imagined ‘transgender’ community in new ways that would scarcely be feasible in offline contexts.

2.15 Online Transgender Communities and Wellbeing

Though not all of the labels coined in online trans discourse are embraced or find common use outside of the communities from which they originate, the frequency with which such terms are coined demonstrates an acceptance of the diversity of possible gendered experiences beyond the gender binary. Transgender individuals, especially those with non-normative gender expressions and/or gender identities outside of the binary, often find that they need to explain and justify their identity to others who are ignorant about transgender identities (Cavalcante, 2019; Ryan, 2019; Buss *et al.*, 2022). This experience can be alienating and emotionally exhausting, while also putting the individual at risk of rejection and transphobic violence (Barbee and Schrock, 2019). In offline social life, a lack of understanding about diverse gender identities often leads transgender people to present their identity in whatever way they believe is most likely to be understood by others, rather than that which feels most aligned with their self-identity (Ryan, 2019). This can include conforming to transnormative ideals (Konnelly, 2021, 2022) or, in the case of post-transition binary trans people who are routinely perceived as cis, no longer disclosing the fact that are trans at all (Edelman, 2009, 2014, see section 2.13). Often, the choice to adapt one’s presentation to align with dominant norms is motivated largely by necessity, with many trans people feeling that adopting a normative presentation is required to mitigate transphobic discrimination in areas such as employment (Barbee and Schrock, 2019). For these individuals, the opportunity to interact in social contexts where such contested gender identities are legible and affirmed by others can be critical in feeling a sense of belonging and even validity as a human subject (Butler, 2004; West, Wada and Strong, 2021).

Austin *et al.* (2020) detail the ways in which discrimination and stigmatisation can contribute to isolation and low self-worth among trans and gender non-conforming young people, traits associated with an increased risk of suicide. They found, however, that online spaces allowed their trans participants to experience a sense of belonging, temporarily escape from stigmatising rhetoric, increase their confidence, and come to view their identities in a more positive and affirming light, with several participants describing online communities as ‘life-saving’. Other studies exploring the use of social media among transgender people have reported similar findings, with online spaces offering a crucial ‘safe space’ for many transgender users and acting as a source of hope and resilience in the face of negative offline experiences (DeHaan *et al.*, 2013; Cavalcante, 2016, 2019; McInroy, 2020).

Finally, by allowing transgender people to connect regardless of geographic proximity, online transgender communities can be significantly larger and more diverse than is typically possible in offline settings, increasing the likelihood that individual transgender people can find and connect with others that share similar experiences. The scarcity of offline transgender social spaces mean that not every transgender individual will be able to access one (Cavalcante, 2016) and are unlikely to be able to seek alternatives if they feel they do not 'fit in' with a particular group. Due to the small number of transgender people relative to the general population and the diversity of identities included within 'the transgender umbrella' (Zimman, 2020), even transgender people who are able to access offline transgender support or social groups may not find anyone they feel shares their experience and/or relevant intersecting identities (Cavalcante, 2016). This is a common experience among those whose identities are marginalised within the transgender community, such as nonbinary people, who frequently find that the existing members of offline groups do not recognise nonbinary identities as legitimate transgender identities (Catalano, 2015; Cannon *et al.*, 2017; Barbee and Schrock, 2019; Kichler, 2021). Experiences of gender transition and shifting social gender roles can also be significantly influenced by an individual's race and culture, for example, shaped by dominant discourses about racialised masculinity/femininity and cultural variations in normative gender roles (de Vries, 2012). This is further complicated by the fact that much of mainstream transgender discourse reproduces existing racial inequalities by amplifying the perspectives of comparatively privileged white trans people and failing to recognise the experiences of trans people of colour (Konnelly, 2023), both online and offline. However, the greater reach of social media can facilitate valuable connections between trans people who share the same specific intersections of identity, which can be particularly valuable for those who are multiply marginalised (Cavalcante, 2019; Haimson *et al.*, 2021). The greater quantity of online social venues and the ease with which they can be accessed, created, and moved between drastically increases the opportunities for affirmative social connection.

2.16 Conclusion

This chapter has served to contextualise this thesis within the wider academic landscape, bringing together theoretical concepts from various subfields of sociolinguistics and broader social media and surveillance studies research on which I have built the present study. Throughout the chapter, I have introduced the broad sociocultural lens through which I will approach questions of identity construction and negotiation, as well as my perspective as a trans researcher working within trans linguistics. I have also argued for and evidenced the significance of social media as a site of study when working with trans participants and seeking to further transgender liberation. Having introduced current research on both online identity construction and, specifically, *transgender* online identity construction, this thesis aims to further this research by adopting a participant-focused approach that acknowledges the inseparability of participants' online and offline lives. In the next chapter, I will outline my methodological approach and data, describing in detail my approach to collecting and analysing both social media and interview data.

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses in detail on the methodological approach I have taken to answer my research questions, outlined again here:

RQ4. How do my participants construct imagined audiences in response to different forms of online surveillance across social media contexts?

RQ5. How does the social media context shape the identities constructed by my participants as transgender people?

RQ6. How does participants' online identity construction interact with their offline identity construction – how is it enabled and constrained?

To answer these questions, I combine analysis of two data types: posts to participants' social media accounts and interview data from two semi-structured interviews. Both of these data types will be discussed in more detail in sections 3.4 and 3.6 respectively. However, to summarise, participant social media is multimodal in nature and was collected in the form of screenshots or screen recorded video from the social media contexts that participants identified as important to their online social life. Images and selected video stills were then redrawn to maintain participant anonymity. This data is used to directly analyse how my participants construct their identity in different social media contexts. Interview data was also collected during two semi-structured online interviews taking place at the start and end of the three-month observation period.

Section 3.2 is focused on my participants, discussing my inclusion criteria and recruitment process before finally introducing my participants. Section 3.3 concerns my study design, including my rationale for working with both social media and interview data. As my study utilises two data types, I specifically address data collection for both social media and interview data in sections 3.4 and 3.5 respectively. Section 3.6 details my analytical approach and the various frameworks I draw upon in analysing such a diverse dataset.

3.2. Participants

3.2.1. Inclusion Criteria

This study was limited to participants aged 18-25 who lived in the UK and identified as transgender. Participation was open to anyone who self-identified with the term 'transgender', with no researcher-imposed restrictions or requirements, in recognition of the diversity of transgender identities and experiences.

3.2.2 Rationale

The decision to focus on young adult participants was made for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, data from the Office of National Statistics suggests that young adults in the UK use social media at a higher rate than older adults, with 97% of survey respondents in the 16-24 age group reporting that they use online social networking sites (Office for National Statistics, 2020). This near-ubiquitous rate of use reflects the integration of social media into the broader social lives of young adults in the UK, aided by the increasing accessibility, usability, and affordability of portable, internet-enabled devices such as laptops, tablets, and smartphones (Madianou and Miller, 2013). Smartphone use is particularly

common among young people in the UK, with Ofcom reporting that 98% of UK teens owned a smartphone by the age of 15, and that the vast majority primarily use these devices to access the internet (Ofcom, 2023). Considering these statistics, it is likely that most UK young adults aged 18-25 will already have extensive experience of using social media while still being among the first generation to have made use of such technologies while developing their adult identities. For queer young people in particular, social media also serves an important role in connecting queer youth and young adults to a broader queer community, facilitating the development of online supportive relationships (Renninger, 2015; Cavalcante, 2019; McInroy, 2020) and offering tools to organise and structure involvement with offline queer events and communities (Hardy, 2021; Aldridge *et al.*, 2024).

High rates of social media use among younger people and greater time spent online may also make them more susceptible to experiencing harms on social media, particularly if they are members of a marginalised community (Ofcom, 2022). This risk is especially high for transgender people, who experience online abuse at a higher rate than their cisgender peers (Powell, Scott and Henry, 2020). Online harm, however, extends beyond direct harassment. Research by Pham *et al.* (2020) suggests that consistent exposure to negative news coverage about queer and trans people, such as reporting on anti-LGBT legislation or hate crimes, led to increased anxiety and depression and decreased overall mental wellbeing among trans and gender nonconforming youth, and Pickles (2021) found that exposure to such reporting via social media produced similar negative outcomes. This is intensified by social media's ability to circulate transphobic commentary from sources outside of the mainstream media, often compounding the harms of negative news coverage with additional transphobic commentary and increasing the prevalence on trans-negative rhetoric on social media to the detriment of transgender social media users (Aldridge *et al.*, 2024). As a result, social media can often feel like a hostile environment for transgender users despite its many benefits, and transgender young people (aged 13-25) report elevated rates of anxiety and fear for their safety when using social media even compared to peers with other LGBT+ identities (Keighley, 2022). This increased susceptibility to identity-based harm on social media suggests that identity management practices may have a significant impact on the safety and wellbeing of transgender young people online, making it particularly important to understand the challenges faced by this specific subset of the transgender population and strategies used to navigate them.

Secondly, research suggests that younger people use social media in ways that might increase the salience of issues surrounding identity construction and management. For example, younger social media users are more likely to make use of a wide range of different social networking sites or apps (Ofcom, 2024), all of which have different features and norms and may attract a different audience, influencing identity construction in different ways. This use of multiple platforms, or 'platform-swinging' (Tandoc, Lou and Min, 2019), has been highlighted as a strategy used by queer and trans young people to maintain a partially closeted identity or avoiding potential conflict resulting from openly expressing a queer identity to particular audiences (Cho, 2018; Haimson, 2018; Hanckel *et al.*, 2019; Buss, Le and Haimson, 2022; Santer *et al.*, 2022). However, its frequency among young people more broadly suggests platform swinging is far from an unusual behaviour. Furthermore, the practice of maintaining multiple accounts on a single social media platform has been identified by Ofcom (2024) as particularly common among younger social media users, with almost half of 16-24 year olds surveyed reporting that they had two or more accounts on at least one social media platform. The most commonly cited reason for engaging in this

behaviour was the desire to avoid context collapse (defined in Chapter 2.8), such as separating professional and personal identities or restricting certain posts to an audience of close friends only. Users in this age group also reported using privacy settings to limit the automated collection of their personal data more frequently than older adults (Office for National Statistics, 2020), suggesting that younger social media users are more actively engaged in managing their online privacy more broadly. Taken together, this data suggests that young adults are aware of and adapt their behaviour as a result of issues such as context collapse and potential surveillance from different online audiences, even if these behaviours are not necessarily understood in those terms. For this reason, focusing on 18-25 year olds as an age group that is already recognised as having markedly sophisticated online practices is likely to produce particularly valuable insights.

3.2.3 Recruitment

To recruit participants, I primarily used an online call shared on social media. Using social media in recruitment was appropriate for my research as I hoped to reach potential participants who were already regular users of social media. I circulated this call through my own online social network, enlisting the help of friends and colleagues to share it among their own networks on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

Additionally, I drew on a variety of organisational connections in order to extend the reach of my call for participants. One such avenue was university LGBT+ networks/societies, beginning with the University of Nottingham and extending to other universities in the Midlands with support from the Midlands4Cities Doctoral Training Partnership student network, as well as additional universities in the North via personal connections with current students or staff. Similarly, I reached out to a variety of queer and trans organisations serving both adults and older youth demographics in the North and Midlands to expand my potential reach beyond the student population. Among these, I had particular success with securing co-operation from organisations in Nottingham, Liverpool, and Manchester, likely due to having participated in groups in these areas throughout my own young adulthood. When working with other organisations, I requested organisers share my call for participants on their social media accounts on my behalf.

Forming relationships with university and community organisations offered a variety of benefits beyond merely helping to distribute my call for participants. Firstly, seeking prior approval from trusted organisers increased my credibility with group members. This is particularly important when recruiting transgender participants, as many transgender people are wary of ‘researchers’ seeking to exploit them, and particularly their narratives around struggle and trauma, to further a trans-negative agenda. This follows several reports of journalists and researchers misleading trans participants about the nature of their work and political goals, with the highly publicised anti-trans documentary *What Is a Woman?* being one an especially high-profile example (Parsons, 2022; Ingram, 2023). As a result, warnings against responding to unfamiliar media or research requests circulate widely in transgender online discourse. For this reason, I felt that seeking approval from group organisers and asking them to share the call for participants on my behalf may help alleviate this potential anxiety among my own participants. Additionally, my credibility was strengthened by my shared group identity with potential participants, being a transgender person who, at the time I was recruiting participants, was also in the age group I was targeting. Further, establishing a pre-existing relationship with community organisers allowed them to serve as mediators

where participants did not wish to make direct contract to ask initial questions about the research. In the unlikely event that a participant did not feel comfortable at any point with aspects of their participation or my conduct as a researcher, group organisers could serve as a familiar member of the community that participants could approach for assistance. Finally, I made the key ethical decision to work especially closely with a single trans support and social group in the East Midlands; this organisation offered to assist in the event that a participant required additional signposting or support that I was not equipped to provide myself. Knowing that I could draw on their experience, resources, and connections with other organisations across the country was significant in ensuring I felt confident working with marginalised and potentially vulnerable participants and discussing potentially sensitive topics. Fortunately, no situations arose where it was necessary for me to take advantage of this additional support as a direct consequence of my research activities.

Ultimately, my recruitment process was both involved and extensive despite my intentions to work closely with only a small number of participants due to the hurdles I anticipated and experienced in recruiting trans participants. More than half of those who expressed initial interest in participating ceased communication prior to signing the consent form without providing a reason. Of those who did provide a reason, three chose not to participate due to fears for their safety in the event that their identity became exposed, two did not feel they could commit to the full duration of the study, and a further three respondents chose not to participate upon realising that they did not produce any social media data that could be included in the study due to the exclusion of platforms such as Discord (see Section 3.4.2 and Chapter 7.6.3 for the rationale for and impacts of this exclusion). Two respondents were excluded as they did not meet the age requirements set out in the inclusion criteria. Finally, one participant chose to withdraw early in the study due to personal circumstances.

3.2.4 Participants

This study included seven participants across a range of gender identities, summarised in Table 3.1. As I made the choice not to pre-define specific categories (see section 3.2.5 for further discussion), the gender identities listed correspond to participants' own descriptions of their gender identity, including where participants provided multiple identity labels. Similarly, the pronouns listed represent every pronoun that a participant reported using. For many participants, pronoun use was context-dependent, and most chose to consistently use a single pronoun when asked how they would prefer to be referred to throughout the thesis. The exception to this is Lyra, who requested I alternate between 'she' and 'they' pronouns at different points across the thesis. Table 3.1 also includes information about the participants' age and the social media platforms they visited regularly (further information about the platforms and accounts included can be found in Table 3.2). All participants lived in England, with Ethan and Lyra living in the Midlands, Blåhaj and Gregory in the South, and Ash, Bee, and Colin in the North.

Table 3.1: Information about participants

Pseudonym	Gender identity	Pronouns	Age	Platforms Used
Ash	Nonbinary, transmasculine	they/them	25	Discord, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter
Bee	Nonbinary	they/he	25	Discord, Facebook, Twitter
Blåhaj	Trans woman	she/her	23	Discord, Instagram, Twitter
Colin	Transmasculine, nonbinary trans man	he/they	25	Discord, Facebook, Twitter
Ethan	Trans man	he/him	21	Instagram, Letterboxd, Reddit, Twitter
Gregory	Trans man	he/him	25	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Tumblr, Twitch.tv, Twitter, YouTube
Lyra	Genderfluid, enby, transfeminine	she/they/he	18	Discord, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter

All of my participants had transitioned socially across most or all areas of their life with the exception of Bee, who shared their nonbinary identity only with close friends and family. Blåhaj and Colin had been taking gender-affirming hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for some time before the study began, while Gregory began testosterone soon after confirming his participation. Ash and Ethan were, at the time of their participation, actively pursuing gender-affirming care having socially transitioned years prior. Lyra, the youngest of my participants, had only recently embraced her transgender identity and did not report any intentions to pursue medical transition.

3.2.5 Working with Transgender Participants

In designing this research, I was mindful of the reality that participating in research such as my own may be especially daunting for transgender participants. As Zimman (2020) points out, there are many historic examples of research within linguistics that has attempted to categorise, compare, and pass judgement on transgender participants in harmful, ignorant, and pathologising ways (see also Chapter 2.4). As per the ideals of trans linguistics (Zimman, 2021: see Section 3.6.4), this research seeks not to generalise about the experiences of all transgender people. Instead, I explore the ways in which my participants construct identities and challenge dominant genders norms while highlighting the creative and sophisticated ways they navigate a varied online and offline social contexts as transgender people. Further, I was conscious in my study design of potential ways in which typical research practice may impose unwelcome or generalising categorisations on my participants and worked to maximise my participants' agency in participating.

One key area warranting conscientious consideration in conducting and communicating research with transgender participants is language, as the language used to describe transgender identities and experiences is often especially salient for members of the

transgender community (Zimman, 2021). Language is a central way in which transgender people take agency over defining and expressing their identities, and failing to use language that aligns with an individual's self-definition can cause significant harm and be experienced as a denial of a trans person's identity (Zimman, 2019; Turton, 2021). However, both the vocabulary and the linguistic norms surrounding transgender identities and experiences are rapidly evolving (Dame, 2016; Zimman, 2017, 2020, 2021; Schudson and van Anders, 2019) and individual transgender people often differ significantly in their language preferences (Etengoff, 2019; Ryan, 2019). For this reason, I argue it is important to allow transgender participants the opportunity to describe their identity in their own words and specify the language and pronouns they feel is most appropriate or empowering, rather than imposing labels as a researcher.

It was also necessary to consider the importance of naming as a part of many transgender people's gender expression in considering my use of pseudonyms. The most apparent source of potential harm came from assigning pseudonyms due the likelihood of participants feeling that I had imposed upon them a name that did not align with their gender identity or expression, particularly for participants who did not identify as wholly male or female. That said, choosing a gender-affirming name is a significant milestone in many trans people's transition and requiring participants to choose another for the purposes of this research could cause undue stress. To reduce the likelihood of this, participants were encouraged to consider non-name pseudonyms if they preferred, following the approach taken by boyd (2014). Where participants expressed that they did not wish to use a pseudonym, I did not insist upon this provided they had given prior consent for their name to be used (see Appendix 1); instead, I referred to the participant using their first name only.

3.3 Study Design

This study makes use of two data types: participants' social media data, and interview data from two semi-structured interviews. While the intention to analyse participants' online identity construction using posts they made on social media was central to this project from its inception, it became clear that, to effectively answer my research questions, I would require additional contextual information and understanding of how my participants' online social practices fit into their social lives more broadly. In seeking to develop a methodology suitable for answering these questions, I first took insights from linguistic ethnography.

Linguistic ethnography is the study of language within its social context, typically involving researchers spending time with their participants within the context being studied. Known as participant observation, it is likened by Papen (2019) to 'hanging out' with participants, shadowing them and taking part in their lives throughout the course of the research. During this time, researchers usually gather multiple data types to use in their analysis, such as making video or audio recordings of interactions with and between participants, taking photographs, performing interviews, and documenting their experience using fieldnotes. This variety allows for different data types to be used in combination with each other to create a more robust picture of how language is used to achieve various purposes in a given social context, allowing for more nuanced conclusions to be drawn (Copland and Creese, 2015). Although participant observation takes many different forms depending on the social context being studied and the level of access researchers are able to achieve, it typically involves regular physical co-presence as researchers are observing and interacting with participants in the social context being studied (Reilly, 2009). However, Tagg and Lyons (2020) argue that putting too great an emphasis on 'being there' in the same physical space as

participants can limit the kinds of contexts available for research by linguistic ethnographers, notably excluding online social communities which do not rely on physical shared spaces.

In light of this, researchers have sought to identify and demonstrate the ways in which online communities develop and negotiate a sense of shared identity, shared norms, and shared communicative resources despite this lack of physical co-presence (Baym, 1999; Parks, 2010; Dame, 2016; Heritage and Koller, 2020). One notable approach to adapting linguistic ethnographic methods to the study of online communities is Androutsopoulos' (2008) discourse-centred online ethnography (DCOE). Androutsopoulos argues that online participant observation can be achieved through participation in online communities using technologies such as discussion forums, and, more recently, social media. Much like traditional participant interaction, observing and interacting with participants within these online social contexts allows the researcher to interact with participants in much the same way as participants interact with each other. He also incorporates another method commonly used in ethnographic research: the interview. Interviews are often used in linguistic ethnography to gather background information about participants' lives, beliefs, and relationships to the community being studied, which can contribute to a deeper understanding of their language use, and also seek participants' interpretations and explanations of researcher observations (De Fina, 2019). The latter strategy is adopted by Androutsopoulos (2008) to complement and triangulate his observations.

However, as discussed in Chapter 2.6, the idea that an individual's online social life can be understood and analysed entirely separately from their offline life has increasingly been challenged as researchers have examined the myriad ways that users' offline and online lives overlap and shape one another. This argument was important in the design of 'post-digital linguistic ethnography', an approach described by Tagg and Lyons (2020) from which I have taken considerable inspiration in the design of this study. They argue that although online communities develop their own culture and norms and should be understood as meaningful social contexts in their own right, it is crucial to balance this with the knowledge that individuals' online interactions are nevertheless situated in – and inseparable from – their 'offline' cultural and social context. Unlike methods such as DCOE, post-digital linguistic ethnography takes a more individual-focused approach, identifying participants before data collection begins and determining online research sites based on the participants' actual internet use. This ensures a focus on social contexts that are actually important to participants' online social lives. Rather than allowing for a deep analysis of specific online 'locations' of communities of practice, this approach can provide insights into how *multiple* online contexts come together as parts of a single individual's online social life. In addition to collecting and analysing digital data, the post-digital linguistic ethnography approach also incorporates a period of more traditional ethnographic study, observing participants in offline contexts such as their workplace. This allows researchers to explore both the influence of physical setting on the online interactions that take place within them and the role of digital interactions in shaping offline activities and identity construction across contexts. While such an approach was not practical for my own research, I did wish to emulate this attention to the interconnected nature of participants' online and offline identities and social lives and sought to develop a methodology that could be sensitive to the complexities of context when considering my participants' online identity construction.

Considering this, I constructed an approach similar to Mackenzie (2023a) and media sociologists such as Marwick (2013) and boyd (2014; 2015). These approaches combine

analysis of participant social media data with semi-structured interviews to gain insights into participants' own understandings of their online social behaviour, how it fits into their wider social life, and the goals and constraints that shape it. Drawing specifically on the approach devised by Mackenzie (2023a) to study the digital family practices of her participants, I opted for a rapport-building interview at the beginning of the observation period, followed by a second interview after data collection had concluded in which I would invite participants to discuss examples of their social media data. This method of prompting participants to retroactively discuss prior thought processes based on collected data is known as stimulated recall (Gass *et al.*, 2000). Although it is important to recognise that such retrospective accounts are not objective retellings (see Section 3.5), incorporating stimulated recall methods provides an opportunity to gather relevant contextual information and clarify my understanding. This was especially important given participants frequently drew on subcultural or community-based identities I was not familiar with, such as fandom identities, in ways that were not wholly interpretable to outsiders. Additionally, stimulated recall presents a unique opportunity to analyse how my participants position themselves in relation to specific examples of their social media identity construction. This approach was trialled with an informal pilot study prior to my research, following which I determined that the approach was an effective alternative to traditional ethnographic methods in providing essential contextual knowledge to inform my analysis.

Although my research includes observing participants' social media use for an extended period of time, I did not interact directly with participants within their online communities and thus my approach diverges from the traditional ethnographic method. As Copland and Creese (2015) note, while technology can be used to record extensive interactions within certain contexts which researchers may analyse, this is not equivalent to participant observation; unlike linguistic ethnography, it cannot glean the unique perspective and understanding of a local context that is achieved through immersion in the context and recorded in field notes. However, active participant observation was not feasible for my research due to the practical and ethical obstacles associated with researching my participants' social media identity construction across multiple contexts. Unlike offline ethnography or DCOE, which typically focus on a small number of pre-selected social contexts, active participant observation in my case would involve integrating myself into every aspect of my participants' social lives, presenting both an insurmountable workload and an inappropriate level of intrusion. Additionally, online social interactions are increasingly centralised on expansive, multi-purpose social media platforms, forgoing the more clearly defined social contexts of physical spaces and earlier forum-based interaction. This presents additional barriers to more traditional participant observation. Nevertheless, the insights developed from linguistic ethnographic work regarding the importance of considering and studying language within its social context and triangulating different data types were valuable in developing my methodology.

Combining both social media and interview data also has significant advantages when seeking to answer questions about participant responses to surveillance. As boyd (2014; 2015) argues, while useful insights can be gained from digital data alone, they provide only a narrow, often deliberately misleading representation of an individual when viewed without knowledge of the wider context in which posts were made. Unlike many of the digital traces we create when we use the internet, the posts individuals share to social media are rarely passively generated. Instead, they are the product of conscious choices made by individuals who may manipulate their self-presentation and visibility in a variety of ways according to

their social goals, technical abilities, previous experience, and so on (Neumayer *et al.,* 2021). Users may alter their self-presentation in anticipation or surveillance from various audiences to achieve their social goals or minimise the risk of conflict or other negative outcomes. To illustrate, Gorea's (2021) interviews with Canadian teenagers and young adults revealed that many participants who lived in their parents' home felt that their agency over their social media use was contingent on their posts not drawing disapproval from their parents, who had the power to impose negative consequences such as making participants remove posts or restricting their use of devices from which they could access social media. As such, these participants' social media use was informed by an 'anticipated parental gaze' as they attempted to evaluate and filter their social media posts according to their parents' expectations. While it might be possible to conclude from social media data alone that an individual was likely attempting to construct a 'respectable' public-facing image, it would be difficult to distinguish this response to an anticipated parental gaze from, for example, the desire to be viewed as 'employable' (Pitcan, Marwick and boyd, 2018) or conform to normative expectations about social media use in their broader cultural context (Costa, 2018). Further, there would be no way to know if the user themselves understood their online behaviour as a response to a regulatory gaze and thus their sense of agency in this online performance. As qualitative interviews can be particularly useful in gaining insights into an interviewee's intentions, feelings, purposes, and understanding, and how they themselves interpret their own behaviours (Cruickshank, 2012), they can be an effective tool in illuminating these complex issues.

These insights can also aid in identifying responses to potential surveillance that might not otherwise be instantly recognisable, such as withholding certain identity information. For example, queer social media users often report avoiding topics related to sexuality or relationships in order to maintain a closeted identity (Cavalcante, 2016; Cannon *et al.*, 2017; Mackenzie, 2017; Buss, Le and Haimson, 2022). That being said, it is important not to assume that a specific aspect of a person's identity must be being deliberately concealed merely because it is not made relevant explicitly in a given social context. Without the insights interviews can provide, it would be impossible to reasonably determine participants' intentions in constructing their online identity, and in turn erase a key aspect of participant agency. In the current study, the stimulated recall task format of the second interview specifically addresses this, encouraging participants to reflect on their intentions and considerations in making a post to enrich my analysis of how their identity performance is enabled and constrained across different online contexts.

In addition to enhancing my analysis of participants' social media data, the interview data itself presents a valuable opportunity to analyse how participants position themselves in relation to the identities they bring up in talk. This can provide unique insights into the ways my participants construct, evaluate, and position themselves in relation to their various online audiences and the identities they perform across different online contexts. Previous research has used interview data to effectively explore similar issues. For example, Hanckel *et al.* (2019) analysed how queer young people frequently categorised their real and potential online audiences into two distinct groups in their interview talk: an in-group of affirming peers and a broad category of others who they perceived as less likely to be understanding or supportive. In this way, interview data was able to provide insights into how these queer participants segmented their audiences and evaluated their posts to maintain a social media presence that was suitable 'for them' – a wider audience including family members, colleagues, and acquaintances – while reserving a more open queer identity

expression for their queer ingroup. Furthermore, interviews carried out by Santer *et al.* (2022) revealed complex processes of evaluation and positioning as participants discussed their social media self-presentation, often highlighting the constructed and partial nature of their online identity performance and how they wished to distinguish themselves from it in the context of the interview. As demonstrated by these examples, the various identities constructed by participants and those who might perceive them become resources for participants' identity work within the context of the interview, producing rich data for linguistic analysis.

In using interviews for this purpose, it is important to remember that interview data, like any social interaction, occurs within and is shaped by the specific social context of the interview (Talmy, 2011; Cruickshank, 2012) and is co-constructed by both interviewer and interviewee (S. Mann, 2011). For this reason, the temptation to approach interview data as objective reports of a participant's experiences, intentions, thoughts, or feelings must be resisted. Rather, interviews are understood as collaborative constructions of particular events and subjective experiences within the interview context. While the emergence and contextually situated nature of identity is foregrounded in sociocultural analysis (see Chapter 2.5) and in my focus on variations in identity construction across online contexts, it may be easier to overlook when using interview data as a source for contextual information in my analysis of participants' social media data. For example, participants may adapt or selectively share information in cases where greater detail could undermine the identity they wish to construct in the interview context. Nonetheless, the insights gained from interviews can provide information that allows for deeper and more nuanced analysis of digital data (Androutsopoulos, 2008) and reduce the risk of analysis based on wrongful assumptions about the user's subjective experience (Litt, 2012), even if this cannot be eliminated entirely. As such, interview data have a meaningful role in aiding my analysis of participants' social media identity construction.

3.4 Social Media Data

3.4.1 Introduction

The participant-focused approach of this study aims to understand participants' polymedia identity practices, rather than investigate a specific online community or social context. I therefore allowed participants to indicate which social media platforms they personally used and considered important to their online social life, rather than pre-selecting a specific platform or group of platforms. For the purposes of this research, I follow boyd and Ellison in understanding social media broadly as:

'web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of others with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.'

boyd and Ellison 2007, pp. 211

While the continuing development of social media platforms has, at times, strained this definition, it remains flexible enough to accommodate much of social media. For example, even platforms which background individual connections and 'following' features, such as TikTok and Reddit, still maintain some degree of this functionality. Additionally, the users of these sites still regularly prioritise the articulation and communication of their connections

with others based on imagined communities and shared interests using both concrete site features, such as subreddits, or through the creation of imagined communities based around specific hashtags, such as TikTok's interest-based hashtag 'communities' like 'BookTok', 'AltTok', 'KinkTok', etc. (Maddox and Gill, 2023). This definition, however, was secondary to my participants' own judgement and actual usage: participants rarely requested a specific definition and instead sought clarification as to whether specific platforms would be included, e.g. 'does watching YouTube count if I never leave comments?'. Decisions on which accounts and platforms to include in my analysis were ultimately made based on participants' actual usage (often resulting in data being collected from several accounts for a single participant on a single platform), the practical and ethical feasibility of collecting data from a given context (see Section 3.4.2), and participants' own comfort.

This inclusive approach benefited my research in a number of ways. Firstly, the inclusion of multiple research sites per participant allows for exploration of platform-swinging behaviour (Tandoc, Lou and Min, 2019) and how my participants exploit the affordances of different platforms for different social purposes in a polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller, 2013) (see Chapter 2.10). Furthermore, such a broad view of social media allows participants to indicate whether they may be using lesser-known or unconventional websites or groups online for social purposes. While many potential participants were likely to use the same popular and well-known social media platforms, individuals often turn to niche communities with a comparatively narrow focus to construct identities that may be stigmatised or even unintelligible to general audiences. Previous linguistic research into transgender identity construction online has drawn on data from specific sites and forums made by and for transgender people to produce valuable analyses (Zimman and Hall, 2009; Marciano, 2014), demonstrating the value of spaces that are restricted in their membership. However, many such groups make use of privacy features, such as Facebook's private groups, to screen and approve new members while excluding outsiders (Yeshua-Katz and Hård af Segerstad, 2020; Mackenzie, 2023a). The private nature of these groups means they can often cater to a far smaller userbase, creating unique contexts for identity construction. By allowing users to define the online social contexts that are important to them, communities such as these can be included in the analysis where they might otherwise have remained unknown to me.

3.4.2 Data Accessibility

A key issue to be accounted for in data collection was data accessibility, resulting in the adoption of a blended approach in which I personally collected data from participants' publicly accessible profiles and private profiles to which they had granted me access, but relied on participants to provide their own data from online sources they wished to remain private or which would have been inappropriate for me to access. Though many studies have been carried out in which researchers have accessed restricted content on sites such as Facebook by simply adding participants as 'friends' for the duration of the research (e.g. Androutsopoulos, 2014; Georgakopoulou, 2017), this course of action would not necessarily have allowed me to access everything my participants wished to include in the dataset. For example, restricted groups like the support groups discussed previously often work to ensure that these groups remain a safe space for their members through the use of invite-only approval processes (Yeshua-Katz and Hård af Segerstad, 2020; Mackenzie, 2023a), making them inaccessible to researchers who do not share specific identities or experiences without potentially violating the privacy and wishes of group members.

Rather than exclude potentially valuable but inaccessible data from the dataset, I adopted the approach outlined by Tagg (2012) in her work on the language of SMS communication. In seeking to build a dataset of messages sent by participants as part of their private communications with others, she found it necessary to rely on participants themselves to submit a record of their sent messages rather than accessing their conversations directly. As she notes, this method does increase the risk of participants selecting data according to their own motivations rather than the desire to create a truly representative dataset, such as deliberately excluding messages they felt would not make for interesting data or might conflict with their desired self-presentation. To address this, I discussed the issue of data selectivity with my participants and stressed my desire for data that represented their 'everyday' use, encouraging participants to submit all data they felt comfortable sharing with me, regardless of whether they judged it likely to be relevant or valuable (Tagg, 2012). Similarly, I advised participants not to attempt to remove any identifying information about themselves or others from their own data. This was in part to ensure that the anonymisation of data would be consistent and equally effective across the whole dataset (see Section 3.4.3) but also served to minimise the risk of participants excluding data that might otherwise be valuable to the research. This had the additional benefit of reducing the burden of data collection on participants by removing the need to alter data prior to submission.

Beyond the practical considerations of accessing data, a further benefit of involving participants in the collection of their data is that it serves to empower participants (Tagg *et al.*, 2017; Mackenzie, 2023a). The imbalance of power between researcher and participant may deter participants from asking for specific data to be excluded from accounts to which they grant a researcher access, especially if they feel such posts are personal or embarrassing, and could motivate participants to alter their social media habits due to the presence of a researcher in their audience. Involving participants directly in the collection of data allows them to reflect upon whether or not they are comfortable sharing individual posts from private accounts or groups before I am ever given access to them. This removed the potential burden placed upon participants to monitor the way they use private online spaces, minimising the potential impact of my observation on their online social lives and facilitating more ethical research.

Although including participants in data collection can give researchers access to private communications, I chose to exclude posts from private conversations and group chats and instead focus on 'one-to-many' posts made by participants (Santer *et al.*, 2022). This was not only to avoid situations in which it would be necessary to gain consent from individuals who had not chosen to participate in the study, but also because, as a single researcher, it was necessary to limit the scope of this project in some way and focus on the data sources I felt would be most useful in answering my research questions. Direct messaging involves selecting specific recipients that will be notified of the message, and research by Tagg *et al.* (2017) found that although most messaging platforms store persistent logs of previous messages that can be retrieved or shared, users typically think of private messages as impermanent and unlikely to be shared or accessed at a later date. As my research is focused specifically on how my participants construct their identity in the context of online surveillance from both known and unknown audiences, I felt that these issues would be most salient for my participants in making one-to-many posts for which the actual audience is often difficult to predict or determine (Litt, 2012), even on accounts or within groups where the potential audience is restricted to various degrees. While private messaging data would have been an interesting point of comparison in examining how my participants' construct

their identity for a potentially unknown audience vs. a known one, I ultimately determined that this added value would not outweigh the practical and ethical concerns of including such data.

There are areas in which the lines between ‘one-to-many’ and ‘private correspondence’ become blurred in the contemporary social media landscape, however. One key example of this is the platform Discord, a social platform that offers text chatting, voice/video calling, and limited streaming functionality. Users can either make use of these features through ‘direct messaging’, which allows users to chat with existing friends and create group chats, or through joining and creating ‘servers’ intended for hosting large communities. While direct messaging on Discord was clearly outside the bounds of my data collection, Discord servers presented an interesting grey area. These servers operate most similarly to discussion boards or forums, separated into channels (which function similarly to chat rooms, separated into either text chat or voice/video chat) dedicated to different community relevant topics. Many companies, particularly in the gaming sphere, now primarily host communities for their users on Discord, using the platform to make announcements, host livestreamed events, and offer a space for fans to chat, with these large Discord servers largely replacing official forums (Plunkett, 2023). In the case of these large servers, it is unclear whether users consider their messages to be most similar to private correspondence or one-to-many communication.

Although Discord does differentiate between ‘public’ and ‘private’ servers, all Discord data would be considered private under my University ethics framework as even public servers require users to make a Discord account, access the server via a shared link, and typically engage with the server in some way (e.g. accepting rules) before they are allowed to view or participate in conversations. As such, although community Discord servers often occupy a similar social niche to platforms such as Reddit, it cannot be considered publicly accessible data in the same way. Private servers, on the other hand, are invite-only and are often used in a similar way to larger ‘group chats’, understood by users as more akin to private messaging than using a public social media platform and thus posing similar challenges to collecting data from participants’ private correspondence. Furthermore, the complexity of Discord data pose unique challenges when compared to other data types I worked with. Communication on Discord is split between text channels, where users can send text-based messages and multimedia files, and voice channels, where members congregate to chat using real-time video and audio chat and host livestreams. While text channel messages persist on the server, interactions in voice channels are not recorded. As such, it would be necessary to rely on a high degree of participant involvement in order to record these interactions for the purposes of a participant-focused study such as my own. Although several of my participants expressed a desire to contribute Discord data, the complexity of supervising this data collection and obtaining appropriate consent from all involved parties ultimately necessitated excluding Discord data from this study.

3.4.3 Social Media Data and Anonymity

As ethics was at the forefront of my mind throughout the entire study design process, I have chosen integrate discussion of ethical considerations throughout my discussions in this chapter for the most part. However, I have chosen here to highlight specific ethical considerations associated with working with social media data that were particularly salient

when working with marginalised participants, but which were outside the scope of official ethical review.

The first concerns the searchability of digital data and how this presents unique risks when seeking to do linguistic analysis of public social media posts. Once shared, publicly accessible social media posts are automatically indexed by search engines such as Google, allowing such a post to be easily retrieved when entering its original text as a search query. Because of this, direct quotations appearing in published research could be used to locate publicly accessible posts as they appear on participants' profiles, allowing for participants' public accounts to be identified. For the purposes of my research, this risk felt especially significant due to the fact that my participants are explicitly identified as transgender. In these circumstances, the exposure of participants' online profiles could put them at increased risk of transphobic harassment or result in closeted or stealth participants being outed against their wishes. While researchers in other fields have successfully addressed this risk by simply paraphrasing user posts rather than quoting directly (Haimson 2018; 2020; Webster 2019), this solution is not appropriate for linguistic research as the participants' specific language choices in constructing a post are the focus of the analysis itself (Mackenzie 2018). In order to minimise the risk of unwanted identity exposure, it was necessary to ensure that participants would be made aware of this risk before agreeing to participate and advised of possible means to reduce the likelihood of identity exposure occurring, such as taking down posts or using a platform's privacy tools to limit a post's visibility. In considering strategies to minimise the risk of participant identity exposure, it was important to respect participants' agency in controlling their online visibility and what happens to their social media posts. Ultimately, there is balance between wanting to limit the potential risks that participants are exposed to during and as a result of their involvement in the research project and recognising their right to evaluate risks and make choices for themselves, without my imposition (Tagg and Lyons 2020)

For posts containing photography or video, I also carefully considered how best to ensure my participants remained anonymous, ultimately concluding that all images containing potentially identifiable information, such as the participants' likeness, should be redrawn using digital art software with participants' faces obscured, as shown in Figure 3.1.

The decision to redraw images rather than merely altering them using digital distortions such as filters, blurring/pixelisation, or otherwise partially censoring was made to preserve relevant multimodal information, such as the participants' pose, clothing choices, or aspects of their environment, while ensuring that no potentially identifying information may be overlooked. Images were typically reproduced as line drawings only with a restricted colour palette of two colours. Where relevant to the analysis, additional salient information was selectively reproduced in the anonymised images, such as the colours of the participants' newly dyed hair in Figure 3.1. Additionally, the effectiveness of anonymisation using digital distortions is increasingly under threat from AI tools capable of re-identifying blurred and pixellated images (McPherson, Shokri and Shmatikov, 2016). For video data, stills were taken at key moments in the video (e.g. significant changes in pose, framing, or activity, individual photos in a slideshow, changes in on-screen text etc.) and anonymised in the same way as images, while audio was transcribed. Though this method of anonymising videos does result in a loss of information in terms of motion and audio, it was a necessary compromise to preserve sufficient data for analysis while ensuring that participant data could be appropriately anonymised. Where the participant used profile images that featured their

own images, these too were censored and either redrawn or reproduced in a significantly altered capacity. In the example below (Figure 3.1), the participants' profile image has been significantly altered to ensure the participants' anonymity but preserve relevant social meaning, specifically the fact that this participant and their partner each used one half of a matching set of icons featuring a heart-shaped gesture to visually signify their romantic relationship.



Figure 3.1: An example of a tweet containing an anonymised participant selfie.

Though these ethical considerations and the steps taken to address them were beyond the requirements of my university ethics framework, they played a prominent role in shaping how I handled my participant data and how I communicated the possible risks of participation in seeking informed consent from my participants. All participants were made aware of the risks of identification and the steps I was taking to minimise them, as well as the steps they could take themselves. I choose to highlight these considerations to illustrate the sometimes-unexpected complexity of conducting ethical social media research, particularly when working with marginalised participants.

3.4.4 Summary of Social Media Data

Social media data for this study was collected from a number of social media accounts per participant over a period of approximately three months, bookended by each participant's first and second interview. Data collection focused on participants' 'one-to-many' posts or, in the case of forum-styled sites, their contributions to public discussions. A list of every account included in my analysis can be found in Table 3.2. In some cases, the platforms and

accounts included in my analysis represent only a subset of the social media accounts my participants reported using regularly (see Table 3.1). With the exception of Discord, any discrepancies are the result of participants using some social media sites primarily to consume rather than to produce content, and thus not producing any posts fitting the criteria for inclusion during the observation period.

Since most contemporary social media sites either enable or are entirely based around the sharing of multimedia content such as images and video, social media posts were collected in the form of screenshots or video screen-recordings. Following the example of previous researchers (Tagg and Lyons, 2020; Mackenzie, 2023a), this approach was also used to record text-based posts, as such posts often include visual information such as emoji. For platforms such as Instagram of TikTok, image and video content are prioritised to the extent that users are not provided with features that would allow for the sharing of text-only posts, and text-based captions and comments on posts are usually collapsed, minimised, or otherwise presented as secondary when viewing posts in a user's feed in the app. In cases like these, posts were screenshotted using a web browser rather than the mobile-optimised app layout, as the landscape orientation often allowed for captions to be shown alongside image or video content. Where this was not possible, additional screenshots were taken to display all of the available information and compiled into a single multi-page file representing the post.

Table 3.2: Social media accounts represented in dataset

Participant	Public Accounts	Private Accounts
Ash	1x Instagram 1x Twitter	1x Twitter
Bee	1x Twitter	1x Facebook 1x Twitter
Blåhaj	1x Twitter	N/A
Colin	N/A	2x Twitter
Ethan	1x Reddit 1x Twitter	1x Instagram
Gregory	2x Instagram 1x TikTok 1x Twitter 1x YouTube	1x Facebook
Lyra	1x Instagram 1x Twitter	1x Instagram

Where data could not be collected directly, participants were encouraged to upload their data to a secure shared file on my university OneDrive accessible only to myself and the participant, though participants were free to submit data via whichever channel they found

most convenient. All data was anonymised to remove identifying information and stored securely on my university OneDrive, after which unaltered screenshots or videos were permanently deleted, including any copies of messages or emails containing unaltered data that were stored on my accounts. Where participants made use of email or online messaging to submit data, I sought consent to also collect any additional context or commentary provided alongside the data itself for use in my analysis.

3.5 Interview Data

3.5.1 Introduction

The interview aspect of my research consisted of two semi-structured interviews with participants, following a loose interview guide (Appendix 3) with the flexibility to explore relevant topics introduced by the participants and allow for the course of the interview to be shaped by their responses. Each interview lasted an hour to an hour and a half and were conducted online using Microsoft Teams between March and August 2023. The two different interview formats are described in detail in Section 3.5.3 and 3.4.4. Transcription conventions can be found in Appendix 2.

3.5.2 Recording and Data Handling

Interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams' inbuilt call recording functionality, which notifies participants when recording is in progress. To minimise the risk of data loss in the event of software malfunction or recording failure, backup recordings capturing the active call window and all associated microphone and computer audio were made using the video recording software OBS. Participants were verbally notified when this backup recording began and concluded. Following recording, audio was extracted for automated transcription using the University of Nottingham Automated Transcription Service, and backup recordings were permanently deleted. During the interview, quick notes were made to record any non-linguistic communication that may be relevant for analysis, such as significant facial expressions or hand gestures, and video recordings were used to assign precise timestamps for triangulation with the written transcript. Following this, video recordings were deleted. Throughout the process, all data was saved directly to my university OneDrive for security.

Ensuring that participants were made aware of how the interview was being recorded was significant given the lack of visible recording in online interviews, which may increase the risk of participants forgetting that they are being recorded (Tagg *et al.*, 2017). This potentially increases the likelihood of participants sharing information they later feel uncomfortable with or wish to withdraw. In addition to drawing participants' attention to the recording process, participants were also offered the opportunity to review a transcript following each interview and encouraged to highlight any sections they wished to exclude from the research. Additionally, how participants wished me to handle their interview recordings was also discussed. As Edwards and Ribbens (1998) note, participants may differ in their individual needs regarding data handling and some participants may not be comfortable with researchers retaining audio recordings of interviews. Recognising the particularly sensitive nature of voice to many transgender individuals, I discussed the process of transcription with participants and asked them to explicitly confirm their preferences around how their audio data be used and stored. Every participant consented to automated transcription, though several requested that detailed transcription of their interviews be prioritised and audio recordings deleted as soon as possible. In every case, I complied with participants' wishes

and attempted to maximise their agency in the handling of their data. Although video data was only retained for a matter of hours, participants were also asked to consent to audio and video recording separately to accommodate any participant who may not wish to be recorded visually. Ultimately, all participants consented to both audio and video recording.

3.5.3 Conducting Interviews Online

Online interviewing had a variety of advantages for this project. For one, conducting interviews online minimised potential disruption to participants. Unlike in-person interviews, online interviews do not require travel and allowed participants to schedule interviews at times that were most convenient for them, such as evenings or weekends, without concern for public transport timetables or the availability of interview locations. This was particularly important given the sensitive nature of research concerning transgender identity. Online interviews were ideal for this as they not only allowed participants to choose their location during the interview but also granted me the flexibility to accommodate scheduling interviews for times participants felt they were unlikely to be interrupted by parents or roommates. My experiences align with research conducted by Gray *et al.* (2020) in which participants reported feeling more comfortable discussing personal topics in online interviews due to being their own private and familiar space, making online interviews ideally suited for sensitive research such as my own. Finally, my study was conceived during 2021 when myself and many others were limiting unnecessary travel due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and it was unclear the impact that this would have on my research. Online interviews were most appropriate in these circumstances to minimise potential risk and ensure the study could proceed as planned.

Valid criticisms have been made regarding the accessibility of online interviews for those without the required hardware, internet access, or technical skills (James and Busher, 2009), though the impact of this on my own research was minimised by the fact that I had specifically recruited participants based on their social media use. As such, I could be confident that my participants already had access to the internet and a baseline of technical skills. Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic and associated periods of national lockdown resulted in the widespread adoption of video conferencing software to facilitate professional, educational, and personal contact, increasing many people's familiarity and experience with these technologies. In the case of my participants, all reported making use of video calling as part of their regular social practice using platforms such as Discord or FaceTime and most had experience with Microsoft Teams through employment or education, with the remaining participants sufficiently familiar with suitable alternatives (e.g. Zoom) to enable participation in online interviews without acquiring new technical skills or additional equipment. It is also worth noting that online interviews are particularly vulnerable to potential data loss due to poor audio quality or unreliable internet connections, though this did not end up impacting my own research, likely due to the aforementioned regularity with which my participants already engaged in online video communication.

3.5.4 Interview 1

The interview schedule for both interviews can be found in Appendix 3a. The initial interview was performed at the start of the observation period and began with asking the participant to describe their 'daily routine' in terms of their social media use. For example, I would ask participants to tell me at what points in their day they would typically access social media, which platforms they would access at what time, and for what reasons. This was an effective

way to establish an overview of how much time participants spend on social media, what platforms they used regularly, and what their reported motivations were for accessing different platforms. Following this, participants were encouraged to reflect on how they use different social media platforms for different purposes, to express themselves differently, or to address different audiences. These insights were valuable in creating a picture of how my participants' social media accounts fit together, which would in turn to contextualise their social media data going forward during the observation period. As well as prompting participants to discuss their identity construction across online contexts, I asked them to consider both their online and offline identity construction and whether they thought they presented themselves differently online and offline. This encouraged participants to construct their various social media identities and the relationships between them in talk, producing complex identity relations for linguistic analysis. At this stage, I also asked participants directly if they were open about their transgender identity on social media, whether this degree of openness was consistent across platforms, and what motivated their decision to disclose this in different online and offline contexts.

This interview allowed me to introduce the main themes I would explore and gain initial insights that would help guide my analysis. Participants were asked explicitly whether they considered automated surveillance systems, such as content moderation, recommendation, or personalisation algorithms, when crafting their online identity performance and whether they ever changed their behaviour in response to these systems. The advantages of asking participants explicitly about this topic early in the research were twofold. Firstly, the transcript from the interview itself provided useful data for analysing how participants constructed these systems and their relationships to them. Secondly, asking participants directly about their responses to these systems was an opportunity to learn about responses that may leave no discernible traces in their social media data, such as consciously monitoring and adjusting their content consumption and interaction patterns in an attempt to manipulate personalisation algorithms.

Finally, participants were asked if they felt that their social experiences offline influence how they use the internet socially. Previous research has suggested that how queer and trans people express themselves online is often shaped by their experiences offline, positioning social media as an opportunity for self-expression that is unavailable to them in their offline social contexts due to lack of understanding and acceptance (DeHaan *et al.*, 2013; Cavalcante, 2016, 2019; McInroy, 2020) or describing their social media identity performance as constrained by the threat of discovery from prejudiced individuals with whom they share an offline relationship (Cho, 2018; Hanckel *et al.*, 2019). It is necessary to address this explicitly early in the research as, beyond references to offline events and relationships that may appear in participants' social media posts, interview discussions are the primary opportunity to explore how participants construct the relationship between their identity construction across online and offline social contexts and how these contexts intersect and influence one another.

Owing to the flexibility granted by the semi-structured format, this interview also elicited a number of narratives about participants' historic social media use and how this had changed over time. Though I did not explicitly request such narratives, they ultimately proved valuable in exploring how my participants constructed their own expertise in using social media, understanding their audiences, and responding to varied surveillance. Further, questioning participants about the relationship between their offline and online identity construction also

prompted a surprising number of narratives about the role of social media in shaping participants' current queer and trans identity. Ultimately, these interviews generated a wealth of complex linguistic data for analysis beyond my initial expectations, demonstrating the benefits of allowing for such flexibility in interview design and prioritising relationship-building with participants in research design even for less traditionally ethnographic research.

3.5.5 Interview 2

The second interview occurred approximately three months after the initial interview, at the conclusion of the observation period (see Appendix 3b for interview schedule). This interview followed a stimulated recall task format, encouraging participants to reflect on examples of their own social media posts and discuss their thoughts, feelings, and whether they recalled their intentions when making each post. Five to eight posts were selected per participant to capture a range of post types while ensuring that there would be adequate time to discuss each example in detail. The specific examples were chosen with the aim of including posts from across the range of each participant's social media accounts, and to prompt discussion of participants' social media identity practices and imagined audience. Where patterns were identified in participants' social media posting habits, examples were chosen that exemplified this. Similarly, posts that struck me as unusual or significantly deviated from other posts shared to a given account were also highlighted in this interview. Additionally, posts that addressed the same topic or event across different platforms or directly referred to events taking place offline were also valuable inclusions in this task as they further prompted discussion about participants' identity construction across contexts and how participants recontextualised events to suit different audiences. Finally, posts that made participant identity or self-expression explicitly relevant were also prioritised for this task. This presented an opportunity to discuss posts related to specific communities ranging from the wider imagined queer/trans community to comparatively niche fandoms, granting me insights into participants' understanding of their community-specific communicative practices, such as their use of specific language relevant to a community, participation in internet memes, or community-specific norms for interaction.

The format of the stimulated recall task allowed me to discuss specific posts with participants which I felt required additional contextual information to analyse most effectively, and gave participants an opportunity to confirm, expand, or correct my analysis of their social media posts. Further, Litt (2012) argues that the way a single user interprets their audience is likely to vary significantly between different online platforms and different specific points in time, which may not be captured in more abstract discussions. Rather than speaking with participants exclusively in general terms about their overarching goals and considerations, the use of specific examples of participants' posts to prompt discussion encourages them to focus on their intentions when making specific decisions. This can facilitate in-depth discussions about their goals and reasoning (Chau and Lee, 2017) but can also provide rich data for identity and positioning analysis (Morton, 2016). Of course, the need remains to be conscious of how participants' self-presentation goals within the interview may influence their recollections in that context (Cameron, 2001) and how their interpretation of their goals and imagined audience may be different in hindsight (Litt 2012), and there is a risk that participants may simply not remember making the post after many weeks (Chau and Lee 2017). However, even if participants are unable to produce 'accurate' retellings of their post's creation, how they interpret their post during the interview and what factors they suggest are

likely to have motivated particular decisions can nevertheless provide valuable insights into the kinds of factors are salient to participants in the course of their social media use.

3.6 Analysis

3.6.1 Introduction

This study takes a qualitative, multimodal discourse analysis approach guided by the principles of sociocultural linguistic analysis (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). This approach understands identity as something emerging from interaction within specific social contexts as speakers adopt, negotiate, and appropriate various cultural, local, or interactional identity positions to construct meaningful identities and achieve their social goals. This framework is ideal for this research due to its sensitivity to the dynamic and context-dependent nature of identity, allowing for nuanced exploration of identity performance across contexts. Additionally, as it recognises identity as collaboratively constructed, as opposed to static, the approach is well-suited to analysing the construction of collective identity categories such as 'queer' and 'transgender' while recognising the diversity not only of the individuals within them, but how these collective identities may be constructed differently by different individuals, in different contexts, and for different social purposes. The framework constructed by Bucholtz and Hall does not prescribe any specific methodological process and has proven to be compatible with a variety of discourse analytic approaches, such as Conversation Analysis (Sierra, 2022) and Narrative Analysis (Archakis and Lampropoulou, 2009). For research using multiple data types such as my own, this principle-driven approach provides a particularly appropriate foundation on which to build my analysis, as it remains flexible enough to accommodate the different features of multimodal social media data and interview data while maintaining a coherent analytical focus. This is evidenced by the successful use of the sociocultural approach in analysing both social media data (Weninger and Williams, 2017; Jones, 2019; Lee and Su, 2019) and interview data (Jones, 2018; Sauntson, 2018; Mackenzie, 2023b) by previous researchers. As such, it is used in my research to analyse my participants' identity construction across both data types, supplemented by social semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020) to support analysis of the images and video that appear in my social media dataset.

However, as described above, I also took a bottom-up, participant-focused approach, combining analysis of social media data and participant interviews. The inclusion of two data types, as well as the internal variety among social media data from various sources, resulted in a final dataset encompassing linguistic data, images, and video in all manner of combinations and that varied significantly between participants. For this reason, I embraced a pluralistic approach to my analytical methodology, allowing different types of analysis to come to the fore where necessitated by the data. In this section, I will briefly describe different aspects of my analytical approach and how each was applied to my own data. As I have already described the sociocultural discourse analysis approach in detail in Chapter 2.5, I will not do so here. Instead, I will briefly consider how this approach can be effectively applied to both linguistic and multimodal data. I will also address the additional analytical tools I incorporated into my approach to allow for systematic analysis of complex multimodal social media data.

3.6.2 Analytical Approach

My overall analytical approach was informed by the principles of the sociocultural linguistic approach (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). As discussed in Chapter 2.5, this approach understands the 'how' of identity construction in terms of indexicality, 'the mechanism whereby identity is constituted' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, p. 593). Indexicality is concerned with the relationship between language use and social meaning (Silverstein, 1976, 2003; Ochs, 1992) and is used to explore the ways in which ideological structures contribute to the association of particular linguistic features with various identities or traits. Crucially, the ideological nature of these links means that they are not universal or inevitable but instead emerge from culturally specific ideological conditions. As such, how the social meaning of a given feature is interpreted will depend on the identity of the person using it and the beliefs, values, and norms influencing how different kinds of people use language in a specific context (Eckert, 2008; Moore and Podesva, 2009; Jones, 2012). While the ideological links between types of language and social meaning are often informed by hegemonic ideologies concerning demographic identity categories, individuals frequently understand their identity construction in terms of the identity categories that emerge from, and are relevant within, local contexts (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; Moore and Podesva, 2009). For my analysis, this contextual knowledge was developed through the months of data gathering described above, and by incorporating insights from my interviews with participants.

Given the multimodal nature of my social media data, it is important to note that indexicality does not only operate on the linguistic level, but across all semiotic modes of an individual's identity construction. An individual might style themselves with dark clothing, heavy eyeliner, and studded leather accessories to index a 'goth' identity (Bucholtz, 2015), incorporate graphics related to popular media properties into their blog posts to position themselves as members of a particular fan community (Bourlai and Herring, 2014), or regularly share photos documenting their childcare activities to present themselves as a devoted mother (Zappavigna, 2016: see Chapter 3.6.3). Understanding identity construction through the lens of indexicality not only allows for nuanced exploration of how participants draw on different linguistic and semiotic resources to construct their identities in different online contexts, but also how this might be shaped by participants' perceptions of their audiences.

One key mechanism by which individuals construct identities is through stancetaking, which features prominently in my analysis. Through evaluating ideas or objects, making claims to knowledge or ignorance, articulating various emotions, and aligning or disaligning with stances taken by others, participants can position themselves in complex ways throughout interaction. Stancetaking is perhaps most recognisable in cases where individuals use language to take an explicit stance, such as directly stating that something is good or bad, though stancetaking occurs across semiotic modes. A common example of the importance of both context and multimodality is that of sarcasm, where what might appear in isolation to be an explicitly positive stance ('I love it') may actually be an example of negative stancetaking depending on a speaker's verbal tone or the context in which it appears. As with language, visual semiotic features can be resources for stancetaking. For example, emoji are commonly used to communicate evaluative and affective stances, such as using emoji depicting clapping hands to construe positive evaluation (Zappavigna and Logi, 2024) or a laughing emoji to indicate that a statement is intended to be ironic rather and should not be interpreted literally (König, 2019). Stancetaking plays an important role in interaction as speakers choose to position themselves in relation to the positions taken by others. This is

true for speakers directly participating in interaction, but also those who are represented in constructed dialogue, which occurred frequently in my data.

The sociocultural linguistic approach outlined by Bucholtz and Hall (2005) offers a framework for analysing how individuals position themselves in relation to others in the form of the tactics of intersubjectivity (see Chapter 2.5). These tactics build upon the indexical and positional aspects of identity construction and focus on identity as a relational achievement, foregrounding the construction of relationships between identity positions in terms of similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/delegitimacy. These tactics play a significant role in my analysis of how my participants authenticate their identities as transgender people and construct relationships with their (imagined) audiences on- and offline, as well as positioning themselves in relation to various examples of their own online identity construction.

Previous research using interviews to examine social media identity construction has found that participants often use a construction of their 'authentic' self as a reference point to which their online identities can be compared and contrasted (Zillich and Riesmeyer, 2021; Santer *et al.*, 2022).This suggests that the social relations described in the tactics of intersubjectivity play an important role in how individuals make sense of their own social media identity performances, particularly in terms of similarity/difference and authenticity/artifice. Though this research has not used the tactics of intersubjectivity framework, many of the questions commonly asked of participants in research of this kind explicitly concern how participants adapt their identity performance to different online audiences and the degree to which participants feel they can 'be themselves' in different online contexts, inviting participants to discuss their identity performance in these terms. In the current study, I ask my participants questions about how they feel their identity performances differ between different online and offline contexts, whether they feel any of their online identities are more or less true to themselves, and the degree to which they feel able to express aspects of their identity of different social media accounts. In doing so, the relationships between my participants' identity construction in different contexts are foregrounded, allowing me to explore how they position their own identity performances in relation to one another and the degree to which they are consciously adapting their identity construction to achieve their social goals.

In analysing interviews with LGBT+ students in UK education settings, Sauntson (2018) used the tactics of intersubjectivity to analyse how participants used language to construct their queer identity in relation to aspects of their schooling, focusing specifically on how these students felt their school's teaching program, policies, and practices enabled or constrained performances of queer identity. In my research, a similar application allowed for analysis of how my participants talk about their identity construction in terms of the technical and social affordances of social media. Previous research using interviews has demonstrated that social media users may specifically orient to the kinds of identity construction they feel are 'normal' on different social media platforms when considering their own online identity construction (Keller, 2019). By applying the tactics of intersubjectivity, it becomes possible to analyse how participants understand their own identity in relation to these normative identity types emerging from the affordances of social media platforms and the perceived attitudes and expectations of their userbase.

To further support this analysis of how my participants discuss their identity performance specifically in relation to their perceived online audiences, I also draw on Litt's (2012)

concept of imagined audience (see Chapter 2.8). Litt outlines several factors that can shape a user's perception of their audience and categorises them as either environmental/structural factors or individual/agent factors. Environmental/structural factors include norms based on an individual's social role, norms based on social context, and technical features available for controlling potential audiences on a given platform. Individual/agent factors include a user's reasons for using a social media platform and their motivation to perform a 'socially acceptable' identity. For example, a queer Tumblr user may imagine their audience as consisting of supportive queer peers due to the platform's queer-affirming social norms and feel confident foregrounding their queerness on the platform (Cho, 2018; Cavalcante, 2019), while the same user might imagine their Facebook audience as consisting of people they know in their offline life and anticipate a rather different, critical response due to the potentially high personal cost of causing offense among this group (Cannon *et al.*, 2017; Gorea, 2021). Apparent across the factors highlighted by the imagined audience model is the orientation towards norms, expectations, and social goals, foregrounding users' existing and desired social relations as an important aspect of how they construct and respond to an imagined audience. For this reason, the imagined audience model works well in supplementing my analysis of the tactics of intersubjectivity. Furthermore, this attention to how participants construct their various online audiences aids in exploring the possible differences in how participants understand and respond to human and non-human audiences in my research.

This section has provided a brief overview of the broad toolkit supporting my analysis of both social media and interview data, though different approaches feature more prominently at different junctures throughout my analysis. For example, the tactics of intersubjectivity were particularly foundational in analysing the complex identity relations my participants construct when contrasting their on- and offline identity construction and 'venting' on social media about negative offline experiences in Chapter 6. However, I found close analysis of participants affective and epistemic stancetaking most effective in exploring how my participants construct their experiences trying to interpret the workings of automated algorithmic systems in the interview narratives featured in Chapter 4. This need for data-sensitive methodological flexibility was also necessary to effectively analyse much of my participants' social media data, particularly when working with posts from highly multimodal platforms such as TikTok. In these cases, it was necessary to incorporate frameworks that explicitly accounted for visual identity construction, which I will discuss further in the following section.

3.6.3 Multimodality

In order to explore how my participants used visual media in their social media construction of identity, I primarily drew on concepts from social semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). The social semiotics approach outlines a varied toolset for analysing different image types created for different purposes, though it is built upon the same fundamental understanding of semiotic features communicating meaning through cultural associations with certain identities and values. Like all indexical features, the social meaning of different visual features varies across culture and context. As an example, they note that bright, saturated colours are often associated with energy, though they can be used to achieve different things depending on context. On the one hand, a bright yellow or red used on a caution sign can draw on this association with energy to convey the force of a warning. On the other, bright primary colours may be associated with the youthful exuberance of

childhood and used to index playfulness and enthusiasm. In contrast, lower saturation colours and neutral tones are often associated with lower-energy affective states and traits such as calm, focus, and professionalism. In my analysis, these broad cultural associations were especially useful in analysing non-photographic visual posts, such as memes. To continue the prior example, the choice to eschew the white text typically used in 'image macro' style memes in favour of colourful text can be used to index an ironic stance, drawing on the association between bright saturated colours and playfulness (see Chapter 5.3.2).

The social semiotics approach also outlines several approaches to analysing the visual construction of identity and relationships, which is particularly relevant for my analysis. The first is concerned with how participants (in this case referring to anything represented in an image, whether human or non-human, as opposed to my study participants specifically) are represented in images. In visual media, information about 'what a participant means or is' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020, p. 102) is communicated through symbolic structures, where a signifier with symbolic significance (referred to as a symbolic attribute) is used to confer a particular meaning onto a participant. Symbolic structures can be attributive or suggestive, depending on whether or not a participant (referred to as a carrier) is positioned in relation to a specific symbolic attribute representing a given value, or whether meaning is conveyed to the carrier through more abstract semiotic resources that are associated with certain symbolic values, such as colour. Symbolic attributes are typically emphasised within an image through composition, colour/lighting, and/or gesture, drawing their meaning from ideological associations between signifiers, values, and identities. This is also true of everyday people's social media photography. For example, a user's decision to take a selfie with a takeaway coffee cup in hand might index activeness, business, and productivity due to takeaway coffee's association with being 'on-the-go' (Bouvier and and Chen, 2021). In my analysis, symbolic attributive structures featuring symbols such as pride flags were especially important in analysing how my participants indexed queer identity and positioned themselves as members of a broader imagined queer community (see Chapter 5.2).

Another important way that individuals can position themselves using visual semiotic resources is through the construction of relationships between a participant and viewer. One aspect of this concerns the representation of interaction. Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) draw a distinction between images in which the gaze of represented participants is directed out towards the viewer and those in which it is not, referred to as 'demand' and 'offer' images respectively. In demand images, the participants' gaze is understood as a form of visual direct address, simulating eye contact and therefore interaction with the viewer. In demand images, the way the participant is represented shapes the kinds of relationship and interaction constructed with the viewer. For example, a demand image in a university prospectus showing smiling students gazing at the viewer may be used to construct social affinity with the viewer and encourage them to imagine themselves as a member of that group and therefore a student at the university, while the puppy-dog eyes of a forlorn-looking dog in rescue centre advertisement invite viewers to consider the unfortunate situation of abandoned pets and perhaps go on to adopt, donate, or volunteer. In offer images, the participant is instead represented as something to be gazed at, 'offering' them to the viewer as an object of contemplation in a comparatively impersonal way. Though these concepts were developed primarily to analyse professionally composed images in media and advertisements, they are equally useful for analysing social media photography (though these do often overlap).

Visual composition can also be used to suggest degrees of intimacy within these simulated relationships. These draw on norms around how much physical distance is considered appropriate to maintain during social interaction typically depend on the closeness of the relationship: strangers are typically expected to remain at a distance while acquaintances and others with whom we are interacting are permitted to be closer, while our closest 'personal bubble' is reserved for those with whom we share a more intimate relationship. Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) categorise this spectrum of distance as 'impersonal distance', 'social distance', and 'personal distance', which they argue can be represented by the long shot, medium shot, and close up shot respectively. This is because these compositions represent a similar portion of the participant within the frame as would be visible in face-to-face interaction at various distances. They note that these different types of shot are not intended to represent any actual relationship between viewer and represented participants, but rather to encourage the viewer to connect with the participant *as if* they shared that relationship. However, as Ledin and Machin (2020) argue, these types of shots and their associated social norms can also be leveraged and subverted to create different social dynamics. For example, framing an individual who appears to be hostile using a close-up shot can be used to create a sense of claustrophobia and dread, as if the viewer's personal space is being intruded upon. For the purposes of social media photography, this concept of social distance in visual media is a useful as the choices made by a participant about the distance at which to frame themselves and/or others encourage different kinds of engagement from viewers and may be used to achieve different social purposes.

As mentioned previously, this framework was developed prior to the proliferation of social media technologies, and social media photography does have unique features that need to be accounted for in analysis. First and foremost, most social media photography is what Manovich (2017) refers to as 'casual photography', distinguished from the professional or designed photography of commercial photographers insofar as the aesthetic qualities of the image are often treated as secondary to a photograph's potential to document and share personal experiences. Zappavigna (2016) refers to this style of social media photography as 'social photography', foregrounding the interpersonal aspect of these images and the relationships they construct between photographer and audience. While Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) emphasise ways that a viewer can be positioned in relation to the participants represented in an image, Zappavigna argues that the affordances of smartphone cameras and social media photo sharing encourage the production of a style of image in which the subjectivity of the photographer is foregrounded, and viewers are invited to vicariously share in the photographer's experiences. This form of experience sharing is achieved by positioning the viewer as though they share the gaze of the photographer. Zappavigna uses the concept of 'subjectification' to describe the ways in which viewers of social photography are often positioned as though they are inhabiting or sharing the perspective of the photographer through which their interactions with the represented participants are mediated.

Zappavigna (2016) argues that there are two distinct types of subjectification, wherein the viewer is either positioned *as* the photographer, or *with* the photographer. In the first case, the subjectivity of the photographer can be made explicit through direct representation in the form of selfies (where the viewer may imagine they are seeing what the photographer would see on their phone screen), inferred through the inclusion of body parts such as the photographer's hands or feet in the image composition, or implied through compositional choices that suggest the gaze of the photographer. Alternatively, social photographs may not

position the viewer as the photographer through direct visual cues, but the presence of the photographer is nevertheless suggested by the context of the image as something shared to a particular user's social media feed and typically accompanied by a caption representing the photographer's commentary. As such, a relationship with the photographer is still constructed, with the viewer positioned as with the photographer and their interpretation informed by their imagined perspective. By drawing on previous research on social semiotics and that of other social media researchers, multimodal social media data need not be secondary to the textual in my linguistic analysis but instead understood as part of the larger project of identity construction across modes.

The approach outlined by Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) to analysing interaction and Zappavigna's (2016) approach to subjectification in social media photography are by no means incompatible, and both are used in my analysis in ways that often overlap to create complex and nuanced social relations. For example, the combination of a demand gaze with the selfie format in which a viewer is positioned as sharing the participant's gaze can construct a specific form of interaction in which a viewer is encouraged to consider the participants' own perspective on themselves (see Chapter 5.2.2). This works in tandem with the other forms of visual indexicality discussed previously, allowing for analysis of participants' identity construction across modes. In social media posts, textual and visual identity construction often occurs simultaneously, with Instagram images shared alongside captions (Zappavigna, 2016; Zappavigna and Zhao, 2017) or the use of superimposed text over TikTok videos (Darvin, 2022). For this reason, even my analysis of image-based social media data is not divorced entirely from my linguistic analysis, and both approaches work together synergistically throughout my analysis.

3.6.4 Trans linguistics

My study also contributes to the growing field of trans linguistics (Zimman, 2020, 2021: see Chapter 2.4), centring the creativity and agency of my trans participants in navigating cisnormativity and negotiating various gender categories and norms in constructing their gender identities across social contexts (Konnelly, 2021). To this end, I do not seek reify 'transgender social media use' or 'transgender identity construction' as a generalisable phenomenon that can be defined against a cisgender norm. Instead, I understand social media as an extension of my participants' broader social lives, presenting unique resources and opportunities for identity construction and interaction that my participants can exploit in numerous ways to achieve their individual social goals. Scholars in trans linguistics recognise that trans people are perpetually innovating in their language use to challenge cisnormative ideology and speak their identities into being (Zimman, 2020, 2021), and social media represents a vast expansion of the tools available to transgender people to connect and construct identities in exciting new ways on both an individual and collective level.

Aligned with the goals of trans linguistics, my analysis centres the ways my participants negotiate and resist normativities, particularly cisnormativity and transnormativity. It is important to note that I do not consider it a duty of trans people to actively resist and challenge these normative ideologies, and it is unrealistic to expect this of any trans person in every context. In highlighting that a trans participant is, for example, aligning with transnormative ideals, I do not seek to condemn them. Rather, I recognise how hegemonic ideals not only shape all identity construction in unavoidable ways but are *themselves* resources for constructing legible identities and provide recognisable frameworks that are

often necessary for legitimating trans identity in the face of marginalisation (Konnelly, 2021). My analysis pays particular attention to how my transgender participants authenticate their identities as transgender people, construct their trans embodiment both linguistically and visually, and navigate the technical and social realities of being transgender on social media.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the methodological approach adopted in this study, covering the design of the study, data collection, and analytical approach. In seeking to answer my research questions in a participant-focused way, it was necessary to devise a methodology that was flexible enough to accommodate my participant-focused approach and the complexity of working with the multiple data types that resulted from it. In the preceding discussion, I have explained my reasons for conducting both social media observation and interviews, as well as for choosing to focus specifically on transgender young adults. I have detailed some of the practical and ethical considerations associated with conducting both social media observation and interviews, as well as working with transgender participants more broadly, and the steps I have taken to minimise risk and maximise the value of my data. Finally, I have also discussed the selection and application of the various analytical frameworks that have informed my own analysis.

Throughout my analysis, different data types and frameworks for analysis come to the fore at different times, and I will conclude this section by briefly highlighting some of this variation in the upcoming analysis chapters. The following chapter, Chapter 4, focuses on exploring participants' understandings of privacy and relationship to their imagined online audiences. Interview data features most prominently in this chapter as my participants rarely directly addressed this in their social media posts. Chapter 5, on the other hand, incorporates a far higher density of social media posts and draws more heavily on multimodal analysis to consider how my participants make use of the multimodal affordances of social media platforms to construct their identities as transgender people, incorporating the tactics of intersubjectivity into my analysis of participants' multimodal identity construction. Finally, Chapter 6 features both analysis of participant social media posts and interview data to explore the interrelated nature of my participants' on- and offline social lives.

4 The negotiation of platforms, privacy, and digital surveillance

4.1 Introduction

In my first interview with participants, I began discussion of their social media use by asking each participant to list the social media accounts that they regularly use and their reasons for maintaining each account. Typically, this prompted discussion of the various ways in which the affordances and features of different social media platforms enabled and constrained different kinds of identity construction and allowed my participants to achieve varied social goals. Throughout this process, it emerged that managing one's online audience and controlling access to personal information was a dominant driver in my participants' decision-making concerning their use of multiple platforms and accounts across social media, as well as their assessment of what kind of identity construction was appropriate in different social media contexts.

In this chapter, I will discuss first how my participants positioned themselves as competent and responsible internet users; I explore how they construct 'privacy' and their own protective behaviours to produce identities as informed internet users who are engaged in 'privacy work' (Marwick 2023) to maintain control over their information online, particularly when discussing surveillance from unknown others. I will also explicitly address how participants construct their relationships with algorithmic systems. I consider how participants' perceptions of platforms' varied technical and social affordances work to inform both privacy protective practices, imagined audiences, and identity construction more broadly. Finally, I turn to the issue of privacy violations and mismatches between participants' imagined and actual online audiences.

4.2 Privacy

4.2.1 Privacy and Human Audiences

In mainstream discussions of social media use, issues of control over access to one's information are often framed as issues of privacy. Through this lens, the focus is often placed on control over specific kinds of information understood to be particularly exploitable by criminal actors, such as one's legal name and date of birth, financial information, or intimate photographs (Barnard-Wills, 2012). This narrow understanding positions managing one's privacy as relatively simple, placing the onus on individual users to be mindful of what they post online and positioning the majority of privacy threats as easily mitigated by conscientious sharing. This dominant construction of privacy was also echoed by my participants, and the majority expressed that they felt well-informed and equipped to manage threats to their privacy on social media. 'Big data' surveillance was a conspicuous exception, with my participants' universally positioning this form of surveillance as difficult or impossible to understand or counter, as I will explore in sections 4.2.2 and 4.3.1.

Among my participants who maintained public social media accounts, there was significant variation in the degree to which they shared identifiable information (such as their legal name, geographic location, or photographic likeness) on these public profiles, though all of these participants expressed confidence in their ability to manage their privacy. The participants I will discuss in the following section, Gregory and Lyra, represent two extremes of this variation. Notably, in the following extracts, both participants orient towards similar understandings of privacy threats and 'common-sense' protective behaviours, despite

ultimately coming to appreciably different conclusions about how much to disclose when constructing public-facing identities on the same platform, Twitter.

Throughout our interviews, Lyra typically positioned themself as an expert when it came to responsible use of social media, characterising their relationship with social media as mindful and detailing a number of strategies they used to ensure that their social media use was not detrimental to their privacy or mental wellbeing. Furthermore, Lyra was the only one of my participants to report using additional technological tools to assist in privacy work and curate their social media experience, such as only accessing Twitter via a third-party extension on their computer that bypasses Twitter's AI recommendation systems (*Fraidycat*, 2024). In Extract 4.1, Lyra describes one approach to privacy work that they employ when using their public accounts:

Extract 4.1

1	**Lyra**	if it's stuff that's personal then it's private
2	**Gabe**	yeah
3	**Lyra**	like on like Twitter u::m (.) of course I look at like local public transport or
4		my borough's Twitter accounts to see what's happening?
5	**Gabe**	mm
6	**Lyra**	but I would be stupid to follow them or retweet them because like (.) that's
7		where I live?
8	**Gabe**	yeah
9	**Lyra**	that's just- obviously that's a very stupid thing to do (.) but (.) all I do is
10		retweet like (.) music and that's it?
11	**Gabe**	mm
12	**Lyra**	or like giveaways? (.) literally all I do (.) there's nothing remotely like
13		unique identifier about me? (.) so I'm not too fussed with it frankly

Though participants' understandings of what constituted 'personal' information differed, for Lyra the rule that 'if it's stuff that's personal it's private' (line 1) is characterised as very simple, warranting no further explanation. They later specified that their definition of 'personal' information included their full name, photos including their face, and their location, as well as personal activities such as birthday celebrations and music events they attended that were not related to their photography work. By presenting this aspect of their privacy work as an if-then rule, Lyra constructs a model of privacy work that is black-and-white and systematic, positioning themself as an expert by backgrounding any potential ambiguity or uncertainty.

While Lyra's use of 'of course' in 'of course I look at like local public transport or my borough's Twitter accounts' (lines 3-4) positions their use of Twitter to find location-specific information relevant to them as normative and expected, this behaviour could be seen to violate their rule of separating the personal from the public. However, Lyra foregrounds their ability to engage with these activities that carry a greater risk of information exposure without putting their privacy at risk through being mindful of what types of interaction are visible to others. This knowledge is positioned as 'common sense', as seen in Lyra's evaluation of the kinds of behaviours that would result in such exposure: 'I would be stupid to follow them or

retweet them' (line 6) and 'that's just- obviously that's a very stupid thing to do' (line 9). Lyra's repetition and emphasis of the word 'stupid' positions these behaviours as illegitimate, suggesting that accidentally exposing one's information in this way would be the result of exceptional ignorance, while their emphasis of the adverb 'obviously' further reinforces the idea that their judgement is self-evident. This constructs a relatively high degree of social media literacy as normative and universal, as well as positioning unintentional, indirect disclosure on their part as an impossibility and in turn constructing an expert identity.

At the extract's conclusion, Lyra further minimises the potential risk of seeking information relevant to their personal life on Twitter by emphasising that they use their Twitter account in such a way that an accidental disclosure would likely not result in negative consequences. The concept of privacy calculus is used to describe how individuals make decisions about what information they are willing to disclose in different social media contexts based upon their perception of the potential benefits vs. risks (Dienlin and Metzger 2016), and here Lyra positions the functional risk of seeking location-specific information online as minimal and therefore outweighed by the benefits. Their assertion that that 'there's nothing remotely like unique identifier about me? (.) so I'm not too fussed with it frankly' (lines 12-13) implies that any leak of 'personal' information, such as their general location, would not be meaningful due to their overall lack of disclosure on the platform. While they construct the exposure of one's location as a privacy risk, the degree to which it is threatening is positioned as contingent. In Lyra's case, their affective stance 'I'm not too fussed' positions them as confident and in control. In terms of privacy calculus, then, Lyra positions themself as able to reap the benefits of social media that they desire, such as information about local goings-on, the ability to share music they enjoy, and participation in interactive 'giveaway' events, while not having to disclose anything 'personal'.

The construction of strategies for protecting one's privacy as common-sense knowledge was also seen in Gregory's interview data, though his approach to sharing personal information on Twitter was very different in practice, perhaps due to the difference in his goals and reasons for using social media. Gregory was comfortable sharing significantly more on his public Twitter accounts, including his full legal name, photos of his face, and information about his location via posts detailing his involvement with local politics. Despite this, Gregory similarly positions himself as an expert when it comes to avoiding privacy risks, as seen in the following exchange which occurred following Gregory's recounting of a dispute he had with his mother over her anxieties about his online activist identity:

Extract 4.2

1	**Gregory**	she can't really control what I post on social media (.) I mean I'm not going
2		to post like my address or anything like that
3	**Gabe**	mhm
4	**Gregory**	I mean like that was pretty much like (.) something we all learned at like
5		twelve or thirteen (.) like you never do stuff like that but (.) y'know I'm not
6		posting anything dangerous
7	**Gabe**	mhm
8	**Gregory**	or at least I wouldn't have thought so (.) except for when it comes to like
9		the political climate right now @@@ (.) [being really-]

10 **Gabe** [ye::ah]

11 **Gregory** it's kind of dangerous (.) right now (.) but I'm not going to stop

Gregory's repeated use of 'I mean' in lines 1 and 4 positions his statements of 'I'm not going to post like my address or anything like that' (lines 1-2) and 'that was pretty much like (.) something we all learned at like twelve or thirteen' (lines 4-5) as additional explanations or clarifications to his initial assertion that his mother cannot control what he posts on social media, working to position her desire to limit his social media posting for his own protection as unjustified. Combined with Gregory's indignant tone of voice, the idea that he might think it appropriate to post his address 'or anything like that' is positioned as so self-evidently illegitimate as to be unreasonable, perhaps even offensive. Gregory's pronoun use in 'we all learned' positions certain rules of privacy management, such as not sharing one's address, as knowledge that is universally acquired in adolescence. In this case, Gregory is likely also foregrounding our specific demographic similarities, having both attended school in England at the same time and likely having both experienced the introduction of online safety lessons in our high schools at a similar age, drawing on our shared experience as a resource to bolster his stance. His use of the generalised 'you' and vocal emphasis in 'you never do stuff like that' (line 5) mirrors Lyra's positioning of such basic online safety behaviours as 'obvious' and universal, and his use of the adverb 'never' positions the behaviour as unthinkable in any context.

The second half of Extract 3.2, however, complicates this simple, common-sense construction of privacy, revealing the importance of context in determining what kinds of information are appropriate to share. Beginning in line 8, Gregory highlights the current social and political context as a source of potential risk that might change his privacy calculus. His initial epistemic stance, 'I'm not posting anything dangerous' (lines 5-6) is unmitigated, though he later hedges this with 'or at least I wouldn't have thought so (.) except for when it comes to like the political climate right now @@@' (lines 8-9). Gregory positions 'the political climate right now' as producing an exception to his previously stated common-sense understanding of privacy work, positioning it as anomalous and therefore mitigating the potential threat that acknowledging this exception may pose to his construction of an otherwise expert identity.

However, Gregory constructs a resistant stance when he says 'but I'm not going to stop' (line 11), positioning the increased risk of disclosure as insufficient to deter him from continuing to use social media in the same way. This marks a shift in focus away from the strategy of positioning his social media use as not risky to instead foregrounding the benefits of using social media as he does. Gregory emphasised frequently in his interviews the value he placed on being visible as a disabled trans man and using social media to combat stigma and discrimination, and his final unmitigated conclusion, 'I'm not going to stop', reveals his willingness to accept some risk to his privacy (and perhaps even his physical safety) in order to reap the benefits of social media disclosure. The differences between Lyra and Gregory's constructions of their privacy calculus reveal the ways that different social media users are willing to accept different degrees of privacy risk in order to achieve their social media goals, even as their understanding of 'common-sense' protective practices are much the same. In Gregory's case, his desire to construct an activist identity, connect with online activist communities, and promote his writing on social justice issues necessitates a higher degree of disclosure and acceptance of risk. His construction of an expert identity when it comes to

illegitimate disclosure practices, on the other hand, allows him to position his own social media disclosure, however risky, as an informed and reasonable trade-off.

4.2.2 Privacy and Automated Surveillance

While all of my participants constructed some degree of expertise when it came to managing their privacy and minimising the risk of information reaching unintended human audiences, none reported comparable knowledge or confidence where it concerned 'big data' automated systems. Although not all of my participants positioned algorithmic surveillance systems as a salient threat to their online privacy, all reported feeling unsure of the precise mechanisms through which their data was collected, distributed, and used by these big data systems and what could be done to limit or prevent this. This was especially salient for Colin and Lyra, who positioned themselves as powerless despite both employing multiple protective strategies intended to minimise the privacy risk posed by algorithmic systems, as seen in the following extract from my discussion with Colin:

Extract 4.3

1	**Gabe**	so like with the options for information you give [in apps]
2	**Colin**	[yeah yeah]
3	**Gabe**	like you turn it all off?
4	**Colin**	I try not to- I try not to give the algorithms- I try to give them as little as
5		possible because I know that they're always going to take more than I
6		want them to
7	**Gabe**	yeah
8	**Colin**	and so if I- if I say zero if they then take a little bit (.) it's more in my control
9		than if I say you can take a little but then they take more than that
10	**Gabe**	yeah
11	**Colin**	although I find- I find it quite- (1.0) I don't kno::w I get a little bit scared? (.)
12		not scared but I- I'm very wary of erm (.) y'know algorithms and all this
13		kind of stuff just because I know that like (.) it does very easily spiral out of
14		control how much data they can take and where the data goes?
15	**Gabe**	mm yeah
16	**Colin**	and it- it- it worries me a little bit @@
17	**Gabe**	I don't blame you
18	**Colin**	yeah it's very- it's almo::st- (.) it's almost akin to like cosmic horror for me?
19	**Gabe**	yeah?
20	**Colin**	in the sense that like I have no concept of uh- I could not describe what it
21		looks like I have no concept of what it looks like I don't know how it works
22		and I have- it's absolutely outside of my worldview in a way that like (.)
23		evokes some of the same feelings as things like cosmic horror do for me
24	**Gabe**	ye::ah (.) I see
25	**Colin**	erm so I- I just- I try- I try not to give it any power but you- you kind of- you
26		can't really avoid it @@@

Here, Colin describes some of the steps he takes to maximise control over his information yet characterises this control as only partial. Colin's speech throughout this extract is fast-paced and marked by multiple disfluency features and instances of self-repair, suggesting uncertainty as he struggles to articulate his anxieties around such a nebulous threat. This is particularly evident in lines 11-13, where Colin works to construct an affective stance in relation to this automated surveillance: 'although I find- I find it quite- (1.0) I don't kno::w I get a little bit scared? (.) not scared but I- I'm very wary of erm (.) y'know algorithms and all this kind of stuff'. Following multiple false starts, an unusually long pause, and an exasperated 'I don't kno::w', Colin states that he gets 'a little bit scared' before negating and reworking this to being 'very wary.' This may be an attempt to articulate his anxiety without transgressing dominant masculine ideals of bravery, though Colin did not typically align himself with hegemonic masculine ideals. Rather, Colin's affective stance of wariness positions him as comparatively agentive, emphasising watchfulness, caution, and preparedness as opposed to panic and vulnerability. Here, Colin's affective stancetaking reveals the complexity of reconciling his construction of an agentive, informed internet-user identity with the ever-changing, 'black box' nature of automated surveillance systems.

In keeping with this, Colin's epistemic stancetaking throughout the extract emphasises both the impossibility of understanding these systems and his own knowledge of the risks they pose to privacy. Initially, Colin emphasises his awareness of the ubiquity of big data surveillance, stating frankly 'I know that they're always going to take more than I want them to' (lines 5-6) and later 'I know that like (.) it does very easily spiral out of control how much data they can take and where the data goes?' (lines 13-14). Although the precise nature of these privacy threats is left vague and Colin foregrounds his inability to entirely control his information, Colin's repeated use of 'I know' positions him as informed, while his emphasis on 'does' positions the uncontrolled collection and distribution of personal data not as a possibility, but a fact. The idea that this data collection tends to 'spiral out of control' characterises it as a compounding threat, leaving room for him to construct expertise at privacy management while still positioning big data surveillance as inherently unavoidable. For example, Colin's claim that 'if I say zero if they then take a little bit (.) it's more in my control' (lines 8-9) emphasises his strategic engagement with the tools available in order to maximise the effectiveness of his privacy work, with the adverb 'more' reinforcing the construction of this loss of control as variable; this allows him to construct agency despite the impossibility of total control.

Colin's use of the analogy of 'cosmic horror' to describe his relationship to 'the algorithms' positions them as fundamentally incomprehensible, drawing on the genre's themes of human insignificance in the face of unfathomable horrors to characterise these big data systems as fundamentally inhuman, inescapable, and unimaginably powerful. His epistemic stance 'I have no concept of what it looks like I don't know how it works and I have- it's absolutely outside of my worldview' (lines 21-22) foregrounds the impossibility of understanding these systems, with his repetition and emphasis foregrounding the totality of this not-knowing and positioning these systems as incompatible with his framework for understanding the world. Though the emphasis here is on Colin's *lack* of knowledge, this stance nevertheless aids in his construction of an informed identity; as mentioned previously, many of these big data technologies are considered to be 'black box' systems (Beer, 2017; Kitchin, 2017), inaccessible to the public and often, due to machine learning, with the precise processes through which they achieve their goals unknown even to those who design them (Sundar, 2020). As such, through the 'cosmic horror' analogy, Colin effectively constructs an

affective stance of vulnerability through his characterisation of big data systems as an unfathomable threat, while nevertheless indexing knowledge of discourses around these systems and how they function.

While the three extracts analysed in this section show moments where participants were talking explicitly about 'privacy', there were many other instances where participants discussed attempts to control the flow of their personal information and/or how it was put to use. Typically, participants did not directly associate these concerns or practices with the concept of 'privacy' even when prompted directly, though all of my participants described at least one technical or behavioural strategy they regularly employed to manipulate their information according to different audiences, both human and non-human, which I consider in the following section.

4.3 Audiences and Affordances

4.3.1 'The Algorithm' as audience

Following from the discussion of automated surveillance in Extract 4.3, I first turn to an example of my participants' construction of 'the algorithm' as an imagined audience using an extract in which Bee discusses their experiences with TikTok's recommendation system. TikTok's recommendation algorithm is arguably more salient than that of other popular social media platforms as functions such as following are backgrounded in favour of a user's 'For You' page, filled with an endless stream of personalised, algorithmically selected content. Early in my initial interview with Bee, they discussed having had issues with managing their time on TikTok, referring to it as 'the worst time sink in the world', 'horrendously addictive', and describing how spending hours on the app had historically prevented them from fulfilling day-to-day responsibilities. Later, when asked about their awareness of automated surveillance, they discussed TikTok's 'For You' system in a way I had not previously anticipated. While I typicallly asked participants if they considered things such as automated moderation and recommendation systems when making their own posts, Bee was the first participant to construct such systems as a salient audience during social media content *consumption*. In this extract, Bee recontextualises the otherwise solitary act of watching videos on TikTok as a self-conscious performance for 'the algorithm', actively monitoring and modifying their behaviour in an attempt to influence their identity in the eyes of this inhuman audience and achieve their social goals:

Extract 4.4

1	**Bee**	my algorithm consciousness i::s (1.0) specifically with consuming media?
2	**Gabe**	mm
3	**Bee**	and pretty much exclusively wi::th (.) TikTok
4	**Gabe**	I've heard that a lot @@
5	**Bee**	yeah because that algorithm is scary I'm not surprised (.) I'm not surprised
6		it is uh (1.0) ye::ah I'm acutely aware of that algorithm and (1.0) erm (.)
7		even though like I will try to:: (.) influence it to a degree?
8	**Gabe**	mm
9	**Bee**	like if there is a video that I do not really care for I will try and scroll off it
10		as soon as possible so it [uh]

11	**Gabe**	[yeah]
12	**Bee**	I don't want it to think that I'm lingering on it?
13	**Gabe**	mhm
14	**Bee**	because it likes to throw me rage bait every now and again?
15	**Gabe**	mhm
16	**Bee**	I do not have the time or the energy (.) or the emotional capacity for that?
17		(.) so I just scroll off it as soon as possible
18	**Gabe**	mhm
19	**Bee**	erm:: but yeah (.) the- the algorithm on that is (.) it's a black hole it will
20		suck you in

Bee constructs their relationship with 'the algorithm' on TikTok in a similar way to Colin in Extract 4.3, evaluating it as 'scary' and likening its addictive potential to the all-consuming power of a 'black hole' while nevertheless foregrounding their own knowledge and agency in describing their strategies to influence it. Prior to this, Bee had stated that they did not feel the need to consider automated surveillance systems when making their own posts, positioning awareness of algorithmic systems as only important for influencers and others seeking to maximise their audience. This notably deviates from how more wary participants such as Colin and Lyra construct the threat of algorithms, foregrounding a loss of control over personal data more than the stated function of these recommendation systems. However, while Bee expresses less concern for their data and thus their privacy in a traditional sense, they nevertheless position these algorithmic systems as powerful and threatening, highlighting instead its potential for addiction in concluding that 'it will suck you in' (lines 19-20).

As mentioned previously, TikTok is arguably designed in such a way as to explicitly foreground individual user interactions with its automated recommendation system over interactions between users. While viewing one's 'For You' page is made seamless, features such as 'following' are de-emphasised in TikTok's interface and are not necessary to engage with the app's main features. Instead, TikTok populates users' 'For You' pages with a personalisation system that adapts to subtle cues such as watch time, gradually showing users more of the videos that are most likely to hold their attention (Sodha, 2022). This, in addition to their prior narrative about their compulsive TikTok use, contextualises Bee's statement that their 'algorithm consciousness' is limited 'pretty much exclusively' to TikTok. In line 4, I align with Bee's positioning of TikTok's algorithm as uniquely salient by foregrounding my expertise as a social media researcher and likening their reported experience to that of others I have spoken to. This use of adequation (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) allowed me to construct shared experience and index some knowledge of the algorithm despite not being a regular TikTok user myself. Bee, in turn, accepts this, elaborating on this constructed shared experience by adding a motivation for such awareness: 'that algorithm is scary'. Again, Bee's use of the specific determiner 'that' works to differentiate TikTok's algorithm from other similar recommendation systems. This is repeated in line 6 when Bee says 'I'm acutely aware of that algorithm', with the adverb 'acutely' reinforcing the heightened and exceptional nature of their sensitivity in this case.

In order to gain some control over the algorithm and 'try to:: (.) influence it to a degree?' (line 7), Bee constructs an imagined audience using similar mechanisms one might use when

considering a human audience, anthropomorphising ‘the algorithm’ in order to contextualise their interactions with it. This is reflected in Bee’s use of verbs that attribute cognition and desire to the algorithm such as in ‘I don’t want it to think I’m lingering on it’ (line 12) and ‘it likes to throw me rage bait every now and again’ (line 14). By constructing the algorithm as a interactant possessing human-like cognition and social motivations, Bee draws on their own embodied experience to make sense of the fundamentally inhuman and opaque workings of complex technical systems and respond in a practical fashion (Jones, 2022). Such personification is common among speakers discussing digital surveillance. Jones (2021) identified several common metaphors in how social media users constructed their relationships with automated systems, including ‘the algorithm as agent’, ‘the algorithm as audience’, and ‘the algorithm as adversary’ which feature prominent in Bee’s discourse in Extract 3.4. Bee constructs ‘the algorithm’ as agentive, possessing social goals that at times come into conflict with Bee’s own, and warranting the use of audience management techniques in much the same way as a human audience.

Bee foregrounds the sometimes-adversarial nature of their relationship with the TikTok algorithm in line 14, where they refer to distasteful videos as ‘rage bait’. The term ‘rage bait’ is used to describe content that aims to instil sufficient anger in viewers to prompt engagement, even if this comes in the form of negative commentary. Though it began as an internet colloquialism, the term has grown in popularity in tandem with the success and ubiquity of the content it describes, with major news outlets such as the BBC running articles dedicated to the phenomenon of TikTok rage bait (Gruet and Lawton, 2024). Research suggests that social media users are most likely to engage with posts (e.g. commenting, sharing) that trigger a strong emotional reaction regardless of whether it is positive or negative (Berger, 2011), with this effect being particularly pronounced with emotions such as amusement and anger (Berger and Milkman, 2012). As such, content recommendation systems designed to promote user engagement tend to amplify divisive content (Hao, 2021). In using the term ‘rage bait’, Bee indexes some degree of expertise regarding both these systems’ broad functionality and the way they are discussed in both social media and mainstream media discourse, positioning themself as informed enough to avoid falling for this ‘bait’. Bee’s use of the term ‘rage bait’ is also interesting in how it metaphorically constructs their relationship with the algorithm, drawing on the semantic field of hunting to liken their relationship to that of hunter and quarry or predator and prey. However, though this metaphor positions Bee as the vulnerable party in this dyadic relationship, the fact that they are able to recognise these videos as ‘bait’ and take meaningful action to resist when they ‘scroll off it as a soon as possible’ (lines 9-10, repeated line 17) constructs an agentive position.

Although TikTok’s algorithm specifically is the focus of my discussion with Bee in Extract 3.4, they were far from the only participant to describe similar issues with algorithmic recommendation systems. Like Bee, Ash described struggling to manage their time spent on TikTok and routinely spending several hours at a time on the app despite having ceased posting themself. Other participants reported similar issues to Bee’s experience of being recommended ‘rage bait’ on other social media platforms. Two participants who positioned this as a significant challenge were Blåhaj and Lyra, who used the terms ‘digital self-harm’ and ‘doomscrolling’, respectively, to describe their experiences with automated recommendation systems leading to self-reinforcing cycles of engaging with harmful content. Similarly, Gregory, who used social media for self-promotion, aligned social media recommendation algorithms with broader societal power structures, fearing that his posts

would be suppressed due to his marginalised identity. All of these participants constructed their relationship with 'the algorithm' similarly to Colin and Bee, ascribing agency to these systems and constructing hypothetical algorithmic interpretations of their own social media habits.

These examples demonstrate how constructing an imagined audience to inform participants' interaction with automated data collection systems was important even for participants who initially positioned 'algorithms' as irrelevant to their social media use for a multitude of different reasons. In this case, both participants who reported high privacy concern and those who did not nevertheless came to construct their relationships with their imagined algorithmic audience in a similarly adversarial and threatening way. Participants' constructions of their relationship to these algorithms were united by a common thread of vulnerability, even though all positioned themselves as informed and agentive in resisting algorithmic manipulation.

4.3.2 Affordances and social norms

For many social media users, including my participants, traditional, binary concepts of privacy that draw a clear divide between public and private are less salient during their social media use than the idea of maintaining control over the flow of their online information and ensuring that it does not reach unintended audiences and avoiding context collapse (boyd, 2014; Marwick and boyd, 2014; Marwick, 2023: see Chapter 2.8). In today's polymedia environment, one of the ways individuals can mitigate this is through the segmentation of audiences across different social media platforms, making use of multiple platforms to achieve different social goals and enable different types of identity construction. In this extract, Ethan articulates how the differences in affordances and perceived social norms across Reddit, Twitter, and Instagram influence his identity construction on each platform, as well as how they shape his imagined audience.

Extract 4.5

Ethan Reddit feels like an anonymous::: (.) cesspit?
Gabe @@ yes
Ethan where like (.) no one really knows who anyone is? (.) I've never posted my face on there I've never posted my name on there it feels like an anonymous cesspit where like (.) there was like a few users? (.) like I might- if I'm going through I might recognise the username or something but that's about it
Gabe yeah
Ethan like it's like rea::lly anonymous? (.) and then Twitter um (.) it's one- (.) I guess I have my first name on my Twitter but that's about it and that is mainly because one (.) a lot of people who I know from online use Twitter and instantly know who I am and that sort of thing?
Gabe mhm
Ethan but also it's more anonymous 'cause it's a bit mo:::re (.) on my Instagram it often feels like I'm like (.) put on like a stage for people who I know?
Gabe mm yeah

17 **Ethan** because it's just photos like you can just like- (.) you're like pretending a little
18 bit like oh look at me (.) with my drink (.) y'know that's just one of my photos
19 which is highlighted
20 **Gabe** so is it just highlights for you?
21 **Ethan** yeah exactly it's like a highlight reel (.) but Twitter is a bit more like
22 unfiltered? (.) like (.) because people can see like everything on your Twitter
23 people can see what you like people can see what you interact with it's a bit
24 more like (.) you can't really:: hide there? (.) so I think at one point in my life I
25 kind of decided that (.) I'll be anonymous ish but (.) still be somewhat open

Ethan's construction of Reddit in this extract demonstrates how technical and social affordances can come together to inform his identity construction. Of popular social media platforms, interaction on Reddit is most similar to earlier discussion forums, with users following 'subreddits' dedicated to specific interests and having their feed populated with posts from any user made to that subreddit rather than following individual users. Users typically use a pseudonym and represent themselves using a simple Reddit avatar, and it is common practice for users to maintain multiple accounts (Marwick, 2023). Some of these accounts, known on the site as 'throwaway accounts', can be used for as little as a single post. This likely contributes to Ethan's use of the metaphor of 'an anonymous cesspit', which, though typically associated with impurity or repulsiveness, seems here to foreground the idea of indiscriminate mixing between users, positioning Reddit's anonymous userbase as an accumulation of indistinct, low-value accounts. This backgrounding of individuality is also reflected in Ethan's epistemic stancetaking when describing his relationship with other users, stating that at most 'there was like a few users? (.) like I might- if I'm going through I might recognise the username or something but that's about it' (lines 5-7). Ethan positions the extremely limited degree of familiarity required to recognise a username as something unusual and limited to only 'a few users', emphasising his lack of knowledge about most of the users he interacts with on the site. This reflects his assessment that 'no one really knows who anyone is' (line 3) on Reddit, positioning this lack of knowledge and apparent disinterest in the individual identities of other users as normative behaviour. Though the desire for anonymity has come to be stigmatised and violates the norms of most other major social media platforms (Hartzog and Stutzman, 2010), which is perhaps reflected in Ethan's use of the 'cesspit' metaphor, Ethan positions his own desire to be 'rea::lly anonymous' and not share his name or face as authorised according to the dominant norms in this broad online social context.

In contrast, Ethan positions his identity construction on Instagram as constrained by a lack of anonymity when he says 'on my Instagram it often feels like I'm like (.) put on like a stage for people who I know?' (lines 14-15), characterising himself as passive and having had this mode of interaction imposed upon him. It's likely that 'people who I know' refers here *specifically* to people Ethan interacts with in his offline life, contrasted with the 'people who I know from online' in his imagined Twitter audience (line 11). This is reinforced by Ethan's suggestion earlier in the interview that 'Instagram is like Facebook for people under the age of twenty-five,' drawing on the common view of Facebook as a social media site for bringing together one's offline connections in a single online location (Marwick, 2023), which I explore further in the following section. The analogy of posting to Instagram as similar to being 'put on like a stage' draws from the field of theatre and performance to position Ethan's identity

construction as artificial, scripted, and for the benefit of others, which is reinforced by his later statement that 'you're like pretending a little bit' (lines 17-18). Notably, this aligns closely with Goffman's (1986) analogy of 'frontstage' and 'backstage' in his theorisation of audience design. Here, Ethan positions Instagram as a 'frontstage' context where feels compelled to play a specific social role and adhere to the expectations of those he would typically interact with in offline contexts. His emphasis of both 'stage' and 'pretending' foreground this theme of inauthenticity. His use of the generalised pronoun 'you' in 'you're like pretending' positions this as a generalised behaviour rather than his individual experience, again backgrounding his agency. By positioning himself as passive and his experience as universal, Ethan creates the impression that not only is his ability to construct an authentic identity constrained, but that this experience is part of the normative experience of using Instagram.

Ethan elaborates on this in his example, suggesting that 'because it's just photos you can just like- (.) you're like pretending a little bit like oh look at me (.) with my drink' (lines 17-18). Ethan raises the pitch of his voice to distinguish this constructed dialogue from the rest of his speech, motioning to himself and miming posing with a drink in his hand. The exclamation of 'oh' followed by the imperative 'look at me' positions his Instagram identity construction as inauthentic and unnatural, with 'look at me' foregrounding the self-conscious nature of this act as a performance for the consumption of others. Ethan foregrounds the partial nature of his identity construction on his Instagram when he says 'that's just one of my photos which is highlighted' (lines 18-19), suggesting that he is 'pretending' in his Instagram posts through his highlighting of specific, purposefully constructed images. In the following turn, I take up Ethan's use of 'highlighted' to ask if Instagram is 'just highlights' for him (line 20), with the adverb 'just' supporting Ethan's construction of this kind of identity construction via 'highlights' as partial. Ethan's response that 'it's like a highlight reel' (line 21) echoes a metaphor frequently used to describe the use of social media to construct an idealised identity (Gorea, 2021), but also foregrounds the highly curated nature of his identity construction on the site, likening it to a form of promotional material where narrative is backgrounded in favour of presenting eye-catching moments in a decontextualised way to capture audience attention.

Ethan's construction of Twitter also foregrounds the affordances of the platform, particularly when he says 'people can see like everything on your Twitter people can see what you like people can see what you interact with' (lines 22-23). Notably, this demonstrates an awareness of the same features that Lyra positioned as a threat to their privacy in Extract 4.1, though Ethan evaluates this transparency positively and associates it with a more 'unfiltered' style of identity construction. While 'you can't really:: hide there?' (line 24) positions Ethan as lacking agency, his body language and tone of voice when making this utterance did not imply discomfort or negativity. Instead, as with Reddit and Instagram, Ethan appears to be linking the platform's affordances to its social norms, linking this transparency to his assessment that 'Twitter is a bit more like unfiltered?' (lines 21-22). Indeed, Ethan positions himself as agentive when he says 'I kind of decided that (.) I'll be anonymous ish but (.) still be somewhat open' (line 25). While he does hedge this with 'kind of', Ethan's use of 'decided' positions his approach to disclosure on Twitter as an active choice. His addition and emphasis of the suffix 'ish' in 'anonymous ish' constructs 'anonymity' as something that is not binary, but rather a scale, positioning himself as able to manipulate his approach to disclosure and identity construction according to the norms and affordances of different online social contexts. This points to Ethan's privacy calculus, positioning his 'somewhat open' approach to disclosure on Twitter as a conscious choice he

made in order to access the social benefits of interacting with other users and their posts on the platform.

Among my older participants (Bee, Ash, Colin, and Gregory), Facebook repeatedly emerged as a platform that complicated notions of 'public' and 'private' accounts. Although Facebook accounts do allow users to restrict most aspects of their profile and posts to an audience of user-approved 'friends,' the age of the platform (and most of these participants' active accounts) and the accepted norms of its use led to my participants expressing difficulties with context collapse on Facebook, more so than even entirely public social media accounts. This is no doubt in part due to the way Facebook was specifically promoted as a way to bring together offline connections in one online space (Marwick, 2023), as well as the platform being more popular among older users when compared to other social media apps, increasing the likelihood of one's audience including older family members, such as parents, who may have the power to impose offline consequences for posts they disapprove of (boyd, 2014). Finally, all of my participants who used Facebook, with the exception of Gregory, had maintained the same Facebook account for a decade or more, having joined the site as young as thirteen and accumulated new 'friends' throughout adolescence and early adulthood from a huge range of contexts. For this reason, my participants' Facebook audiences tended to be diverse, including not only friends and family members but current and former co-workers, old classmates, and once-friendly acquaintances with whom they had otherwise fallen out of touch. As Colin noted in his interview, the way Facebook has been positioned as a way to maintain meaningful social connections and its use of the label 'friend' to describe such connections has created a set of norms in which 'it almost feels personal to remove your Facebook friend', with participants often retaining users in their friends list solely to avoid potentially causing offence by removing them.

As demonstrated by Ethan in Extract 4.5, users will often deal with the unknowns of their potential audience when using public social media accounts by constructing a model of their imagined audience based on their perception of a platform's norms. In the case of Facebook, however, my participants often conflated dominant cultural norms with the platform's norms, with all of my participants who used Facebook reporting that they restricted expressions of queer identity on the platform. In the following extract, Ash constructs and contrasts their perception of their audience on Facebook and Twitter, using an example of a post they made to Twitter prior to the observation period (saved and reproduced with their permission).

Extract 4.6

1	**Ash**	Facebook to me is the:: (.) it's a straight social media site where I probably
2		have to conform more to people's expectations of me when it comes to
3		sexuality and gender
4	**Gabe**	[ye::ah]
5	**Ash**	[as opposed to] other social media (.) where I probably interact more with
6		queer stuff and I feel more comfortable being myself?
7	**Gabe**	yeah (.) yeah
8	**Ash**	I experiment with gender more and being trans more and being queer more
9		whereas I feel like if on Facebook I- (1.0) like how these days I would never

post a photo of myself (.) wearing purely a dress a::nd very much (.) cis woman makeup (1.0) that's partly because I would be worried that my Facebook audience would see that as an indicator that I've given in (.) and I'm not really trans as opposed to if I posted that on my Twitter (.) people would be like dra::g sla:::y this is great @@@

[…] [Ash shared a link in Teams chat to one of their previous Twitter posts]

Ash I was comfortable posting about that on Twitter on my private Twitter because I knew that people would see:: (.) it as (.) kind of a funny joke?
Gabe [yeah]
Ash [that] I was wearing these dresses (.) but I would never post those photos- I would never have posted those pictures on Facebook (.) because all the comments would have been like oh my go::d you look so gorgeous (.) you're so swee:::t
Gabe yeah (.) they'd take it [serious?]
Ash [people] wouldn't have got it or people would have been like you're such a gorgeous woman oh a::ah you're such a gorgeous young woman

For Ash, Facebook was the only social media platform on which they would approve connection requests from family members, co-workers, and others outside of their circle of close friends. In the first part of the extract, Ash differentiates Facebook from the other social media sites they use. Ash's use of the adjective 'straight' in their description of Facebook as a 'straight social media site' (line 1) is reminiscent of the use of sexuality labels in describing 'gay clubs' or 'lesbian bars,' suggesting that the platform caters specifically to the needs and interests of a heterosexual userbase. This is reinforced by Ash's suggestion that they 'have to conform more to people's expectations of [them] when it comes to [their] sexuality and gender' (lines 1-3) with the modal verb 'have to' positioning such conformity is a matter of necessity or obligation. Although Ash does not specify what 'people's expectations' might be, the verb 'conform' typically connotes compliance with rules or standards, and their positioning of gender experimentation and 'queer stuff' as behaviours they must restrict in order to meet these expectations suggests that they broadly align with dominant cisheteronormative ideology.

Ash's repeated use and emphasis of the adverb 'more' in lines 2-8 foregrounds the partial nature of their conformity, which is elaborated upon in lines 9-13. As an openly transmasculine nonbinary person, Ash's gender expression unavoidably challenges cisnormative expectations, but they reported often feeling the need to foreground their masculinity in order to have their trans identity recognised by others (see Chapter 6.3 for further discussion). In their assertion that they would 'never post a photo … wearing purely a dress a::nd very much (.) cis woman makeup' (lines 10-11), they take a strong negative stance, rejecting the idea that they would share a post to Facebook conforming entirely to cisheteronormative ideals of feminine beauty. Ash foregrounds the idea of normativity in their emphasis in 'purely a dress' and 'cis woman makeup'. This becomes meaningful in the

context of other posts Ash has made to Facebook, in which they incorporate visual signifiers that normatively index femininity, such as dresses, as part of a character costume and paired with exaggerated, anime-inspired makeup. With this in mind, 'cis woman makeup' can be understood as naturalistic makeup that aligns with feminine beauty ideals and thus would likely be interpreted by their Facebook audience as indexing a cisgender female identity as opposed to character makeup. Many trans people understand gender identity (a person's understanding of their own gender) and gender expression (how a person outwardly expresses their gender through visual styling, voice, behaviour etc.) to be separate (Zimman, 2014), though such a view conflicts with dominant cisnormative ideology in which one's gender assignment, gender identity, and gender expression are expected to align and conform to binary categories of male and female. The consequences for transgressing this norm may be lessened when such transgression is contextualised within a clearly defined practice, such as cosplay. Ash's emphasis on the idea that they cannot share images with their Facebook audience in which they are wearing 'purely a dress' and 'cis woman makeup' positions their Facebook audience as sharing this normative view, perhaps able to understand a distinction between gender identity and expression as part of specific, recognisable character performance but certainly unable to recognise this distinction if Ash were to experiment with gender in their everyday life, or in a way that their audience would view as sufficiently similar to normative femininity.

Ash's language use in describing how they fear their Facebook audience would interpret their feminine gender expression positions their ability to construct a nonbinary identity on Facebook as precarious. Ash's affective stancetaking in 'I would be worried that my Facebook audience would see that as an indicator that I've given in (.) and I'm not really trans' (lines 11-13) foregrounds a sense of anxiety when imagining their Facebook audience's potential response to seeing such a photo, while also conveying the uncertainty of not being able to predict with certainty how any given member of their audience would react. Their use of 'given in' suggests that Ash feels under pressure from their Facebook audience to revert to constructing a cisgender female identity, while their vocal emphasis in the form of a slightly raised voice and exasperated sarcastic tone positions this as frustrating and unreasonable. This is reinforced by Ash's reported fear that their Facebook audience would view them as 'not really trans', positioning their trans identity as vulnerable to denaturalisation and thus requiring constant authentication, presumably through Ash's rejection of feminine signifiers. This strategy, as well as Ash's emphasis on their fear of potential consequences, reflects the experience of many marginalised individuals on social media, who feel under increased pressure to align their identity construction with the expectations of those in power to avoid discrimination (Pitcan, Marwick and boyd, 2018).

Prompted by their comparison between Facebook and other social media, Ash shared with me an example of a post they had made to Twitter prior to the observation period (Figure 4.1). When the discussion resumes in line 15, Ash is referring to this tweet as an illustrative example of the kinds of queer, gender non-conforming identity construction they feel would not be legible to their Facebook audience. Crucially, Ash positions their incorporation of feminine signifiers in the outfits shown in Figure 4.1 as a kind of character performance similar to cosplay, this time drawing from the gay cultural tradition of drag in which performers frequently craft exaggerated costumes, performances, and personas based on stereotypical gendered archetypes (S. L. Mann, 2011; Barrett, 2017). For Ash, this aspect of drag ties into their broader interest in costuming and performance and facilitates

experimentation with gendered aesthetics and character performances while also aligning them with broader queer cultural practices.



Figure 4.1: A tweet shared by Ash during the interview as an example of the kinds of post they are comfortable sharing on Twitter, but would not share on Facebook

Beyond Ash's voicing of the hypothetical intended audience response in line 14 in the form of 'dra::g sla::y this is great,' the text of Ash's tweet also frames the outfits pictures as performances of a characterological figure with the caption 'The poor lighting in these really add to the milf vibes'. The acronym 'milf', typically capitalised as 'MILF', stands for 'mum I'd like to fuck,' a term frequently used to refer to older women, particularly (though not exclusively) mothers, that are sexually attractive, with the stereotypical MILF usually further characterised as seductive and open to sexual relationships with younger men. Through this lens, Ash's choice of conventionally feminine dress and glamorous makeup is positioned not as an expression of authentic femininity, but a demonstration of competence in manipulating their gender performance in creative and playful ways. For example, though the MILF is a sexualised figure, Ash's choice of high-collared yet form-fitting dresses as opposed to more revealing clothing index the less overt, mature feminine seduction of the archetypical 'MILF' when compared to other sexualised feminine characterological figures, revealing the

contours of their body while remaining modestly covered. Similarly, their smoky-eyed, full-face makeup look is reminiscent of a now-outdated style that positions this character as out-of-touch with current trends. Ash's humorous suggestion in the caption that the 'poor lighting' in these selfies (which appear tinted yellow by warm indoor lighting) contributes to 'the milf vibes' recontextualises what might otherwise be seen as a mistake as a further part of their performance, likely drawing on the association between older adults and a lack of technological literacy or social media skill. For a Twitter audience aware of Ash's gender, sexuality, and interest in drag, their skill in capturing the stereotypical traits of this characterological figure does not suggest that Ash necessarily shares any traits with a MILF. Instead, the degree to which they can embody this persona indexes their familiarity and skill within a specific queer cultural practice that is associated with gay men, ultimately authenticating both their queerness and their masculine gender identity.

In contrast, Ash asserts their Facebook audience 'wouldn't have got it' (line 23), raising the pitch of their voice and speaking with an exaggerated, parodic intonation as they construct imagined comments in response to their photos: 'oh my go::d you look so gorgeous (.) you're so swee:::t' (lines 20-21) and 'you're such a gorgeous woman oh a::ah you're such a gorgeous young woman' (lines 24-25). Ash's use of higher pitch and markedly elongated vowels in 'oh my go::d' and 'you're so swee:::t', accompanied by mock gasps of wonderment and simpering hand gestures, indexes a stereotype of vapid femininity, positioning these complements as inauthentic and further foregrounding the gendered and feminising nature of Ash's anticipated response. The adjectives 'sweet' and 'gorgeous' foreground normative constructions of femininity, which are implicitly positioned as inappropriate due to Ash's transgender identity and decidedly non-normative engagement with these feminine signifiers. This is strengthened by Ash's repetition of the label 'gorgeous woman' in this constructed dialogue, explicitly associating these compliments with the imposition of womanhood and doing so in a mocking way to reinforce its illegitimacy. This characterises the relationship between Ash and their Facebook audience as adversarial, positioning this audience as too shallow or ignorant to recognise this drag persona as 'a funny joke'. Instead, Ash positions their identity construction on Facebook as constrained to a narrow, transnormative model of 'acceptable' transgender identity, backgrounding gender fluidity in favour of a gender expression that remains consistent over time and entirely disassociated from one's gender assigned at birth.

This extract from Ash demonstrates the crucial role of audience and context in determining the success of an individual's identity construction. If different semiotic choices are understood to exist within an indexical field of potential meanings depending upon the context of its use, including the audience's perception of the individual using it, individuals such as Ash must construct models of their imagined audiences that include how they expect members of these audiences to perceive them. In the case of Ash's 'MILF' outfits, the indexical field of the glamorous makeup and form-fitting dresses that comprise the outfit includes both Ash's intended meaning, indexing a creative form of queer masculinity associated with drag performance, and the alternative meaning that they anticipate their Facebook audience would attribute to them by interpreting this outfit as an index of normative femininity. Crucially, which meaning a receiver is likely to attribute to Ash depends primarily on their perception of Ash's gender and sexuality. Ash's Facebook audience, to whom they attribute the belief that Ash is 'not really trans', perceive them as sufficiently similar to a cisgender woman for such an outfit to be interpreted as indexing normative femininity and negating Ash's queer and trans identity. Further, as Ash characterises

Facebook as ‘a straight social media site,’ it is likely that Ash’s imagined audience does not have the queer cultural competence to recognise or understand drag as an art form, or their relationship to it. Ash’s Twitter audience, on the other hand, is more limited and made up entirely of other queer people with whom Ash is friends, thus are able to interpret Ash’s gender non-conformity as evidence of their nonbinary identity and queer masculinity.

4.3.3 Context Collapse

Ash’s example in Extract 4.6 reveals how their interactions on Twitter were largely unaffected by context collapse due to their strategy of maintaining a limited audience, and many of my other participants used similar strategies to segment their online audiences. Though several achieved this relatively successfully through the use of multiple public and private accounts across platforms, others nevertheless reported unexpectedly encountering situations in which these audiences collided. Often, this was due to participants struggling to understand or effectively make use of a platform’s features. For example, Gregory reported repeatedly having problems with accidentally cross-posting story posts across both his Facebook and Instagram accounts after a cross-platform sharing feature was introduced and became active by default, requiring him to manually edit his settings to exclude specific posts (something that he struggled to remember). Another example is described by Bee in the following extract, where their lack of knowledge of the workings of Twitter’s ‘Who To Follow’ system resulted in their personal tweets being exposed to a professional connection:

Extract 4.7

Gabe you have your private account and your work account (.) so just your work account is open to the public (.) right?

Bee yes (.) yes so:: (.) it originally started out where erm y’know (.) I used Twitter for- for personal and private stuff erm (.) and I was with my work attending some events erm and shortly after one of those erm (.) an organisation- so it’s not like a person but a whole organisation followed my private Twitter

Gabe mhm

Bee I went oh (.) I can’t (.) thirst post about Matthew Mercer and look professional at the same time so er (.) at that point I split the two erm (.) because I knew I’d be going to more (.) I don’t know how they found me either because that account isn’t linked anywhere?

Gabe oh?

Bee it’s not published anywhere it’s not linked to any of my other accounts? (.) it’s certainly not on my LinkedIn so (.) I’m not entirely sure how that happened but (.) it did so::: (.) it is what it is

Gabe was that account private at the time?

Bee no oh no (.) uh at that point it became private (.) locked down (.) and then a work account was created so that (.) yeah

Gabe mm [yeah]

Bee [and then] the work account became y’know (.) events (.) all that (.) fun corporate stuff

In response to my observation that Bee's work Twitter account is the only one of the social media accounts they had shared with me that is publicly visible, Bee produced this narrative about the inciting incident that led to this account's creation. Initially, Bee describes having 'used Twitter for- for personal and private stuff' (lines 3-4), indicating that they understood their Twitter account as a private space despite, as they later clarified, the account being public at the time. This reflects the observation that many social media users, particularly those with small accounts, don't necessarily consider 'public' social media accounts to be truly public (Markham and Buchanan, 2012), often relying on 'security through obscurity' and assuming that their public posts are *functionally* private because no one beyond their followers will be paying attention (Marwick 2023). In Bee's case, their repetition and emphasis in 'that account isn't linked anywhere?' (line 11) and 'it's not linked to any of my other accounts?' (line 13) suggests that their imagined audience only included those with whom they had shared the account. Their questioning intonation reinforces their epistemic stancetaking, with their statements 'I don't know how they found me' (line 10) and 'I'm not entirely sure how that happened' (line 14-15) foregrounding their uncertainty even after they have taken steps to address the problem. In this way, Bee reveals the challenges of social media privacy work, highlighting their continued confusion around online privacy threats even after successfully responding to them.

Extract 4.7 also provides insight into the potential impacts of unexpected context collapse. Bee connects their vulnerability to their queerness through their choice of example, positioning overt expressions of queer sexuality as incompatible with professional identity construction when they say: 'I can't (.) thirst post about Matthew Mercer and look professional at the same time' (lines 8-9). Here, 'thirst post' is a slang term referring to posts in which a user expresses sexual desire for someone, a counterpart to the more popular 'thirst trap' used to describe photos (usually selfies) that are intended to attract such expressions of sexual interest from others. While expressions of overt sexual desire are broadly considered unprofessional in their own right, this example is particularly threatening to Bee's professional identity as they work in a male-dominated field and have chosen to remain closeted at work to avoid potential queerphobic discrimination. As someone perceived as a man in professional contexts, having their desire for a male celebrity exposed to someone in their professional network is not only a threat to their ability to construct a professional identity, but also exposes their queer identity and thus undermines their ability to construct an identity that is acceptable within the norms of their workplace and industry.

This sense of vulnerability is reinforced by Bee's emphasis on the fact that the account that followed them was a corporate account, clarifying it was 'not like a person but a whole organisation' (line 6). Though corporate Twitter accounts are not in reality run by a 'whole organisation,' the fact that Bee was followed by an account representing an organisation makes clear that this interaction was not an attempt at initiating social connection between individual peers, foregrounding the collapse of personal and professional contexts. While Bee would likely still have experienced distress at having their personal tweets exposed to a single co-worker, the use of a corporate account obscures the individual human actor responsible beneath the organisation's identity and positions their actions as the actions of – or at least on behalf of – an organisation with whom Bee works. This indexes the power of the organisation, including the power to jeopardise Bee's employment if their tweets were perceived as sufficiently unprofessional (Pitcan *et al*., 2018), while the unwanted exposure of Bee's marginalised identity further exacerbates this power imbalance. In this case, the sudden intrusion of a perceived disciplinary power recontextualises Bee's personal tweets as

part of their professional identity construction and opens them up to evaluation according to norms of professionalism that Bee had never intended them to meet, retroactively reframing their unproblematic expressions of personal desire as violations of professional conduct.

Bee's struggles with controlling who has access to their information on social media also speak to the unique challenges of understanding and managing online privacy. As part of their job, Bee is required to have a high level of familiarity with various digital technologies and the broad technical literacy required to quickly learn and apply new technical skills for niche, often bespoke purposes. One might assume that a broadly 'tech savvy' user like Bee would have little trouble making sense of online privacy controls, but this was not reflected in our interviews. In a separate discussion, they described how they had also misunderstood the functionality of Twitter Circles – a now-removed Twitter feature that allowed users to add a subset of their followers to a list, known as their 'circle,' and tweet only to those followers – in such a way the several of their past tweets later became visible to followers that they had intentionally excluded from the post's audience at the time of its creation. Notably, in both cases, Bee believed they had manipulated their settings in such a way as to exclude unwanted audiences, but the complexity and unpredictability of these digital systems, combined with the inadequacy of Twitter's communication with users regarding their functionality, meant that Bee's technical knowledge was insufficient to protect them from these unexpected instances of context collapse.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I approached the broad themes of privacy and audience to reveal the sophisticated strategies my participants employed to assess, limit, and adapt to diverse online audiences. Although my participants varied in the degree to which they expressed concerns about privacy and engaged in privacy-protective behaviours, all of my participants positioned themselves as knowledgeable and conscientious internet users who were aware of and actively taking steps to minimise privacy risks. This reflected a consensus construction of privacy among my participants that it was primarily concerned with unknown, potentially hostile audiences and associated with identifiable information such as one's legal name, place of work or education, home address etc. Three of my participants (Ash, Colin, and Lyra) positioned automated surveillance systems as a salient threat to their privacy online, while the remaining four (Bee, Blåhaj, Ethan, and Gregory) positioned these inhuman audiences as irrelevant to their personal digital safety.

My analysis of how my participants constructed their imagined audiences revealed, first, that their construction of human and non-human audiences did not differ significantly. While Colin emphasised the inhuman nature of 'big data' systems, both he and Bee constructed an imagined audience to represent the algorithm in much the same way as they might a human audience. These participants attributed human-like cognition, agency, and social goals to the algorithm. In Bee's case, they attempted to identify and interpret cues as to how the algorithm was responding to their identity construction, such as drawing inferences from the kinds of content they were recommended and used this to modify their behaviour. Ultimately, as Jones (2021) argues, humans fundamentally cannot relate to the inhumanity of digital actors and thus are likely to interpret them through the lens of embodied human experience. This appeared true of my participants, who constructed complex relationships with these algorithms and foregrounded their own experiences of disempowerment and fear while nevertheless positioning themselves as agentive and informed.

Secondly, my analysis revealed that participants are sensitive to both how a platform's features and affordances shape its social norms, as well as the known individuals within one's audience, and this greatly informed their choice of social media platform for different social purposes in a polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller, 2013). Both Ethan and Ash clearly articulated social norms for different sites, positioning the Meta-owned platforms Instagram and Facebook as uniquely problematic. In both cases, these participants also highlighted the presence of individuals they also encountered in offline contexts as particularly problematic. This was also true of Bee, who highlighted the potential consequences of a mismatch between their imagined and actual online audience. While my participants positioned themselves as able to navigate the challenges posed by different types of online-only audiences on public accounts, an aspect of context collapse that has been documented in other literature (Marwick, 2013), they continued to struggle with overlaps between online and offline audiences, particularly where these were shaped by imbalances of social power, such as in workplace or familial relationships.

In Chapter 5, I examine how my participants take advantage of the different affordances of various social media platforms to construct their queer and trans identities, considering both the technical features available and the social and communicative norms that inform my participants' identity construction.

5 The multimodal construction of queer and trans identities on social media

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I analyse how my participants' social media identity construction was informed specifically by the social media context. This considers how my participants make use of the technical features available to them on various social media platforms for identity construction, but also how they draw on genres and memes specific to different social media contexts and position themselves in relation to different online (imagined) communities. Firstly, I will explore how my participants use social media to explicitly position themselves as queer and trans people, focusing on how they take advantage of various technical affordances to index queer identity, construct transitioning identities, and resist normative discourses. I will also consider how my participants draw on social media genres, such as memes, and community shared knowledge to position themselves as specific kinds of queer individual in ways that are relevant to the online communities in which they participate.

5.2 Constructing Queer Identity

5.2.1 Pronouns

Gendered third person pronouns can be an important part of how transgender people index their identity, though the cisheteronormative assumption that an individual's pronouns can be accurately deduced from physical features alone leaves many transgender (and particularly nonbinary) people vulnerable to misgendering. While pronoun sharing practices have become more popular in some trans-friendly offline spaces (Zimman and Brown, 2024; Brown, 2025), there is still no widely adopted practice for sharing one's pronouns in offline spaces. In contrast, many social media platforms, such as Instagram and Discord, now offer dedicated fields for listing one's pronouns, while others, such as Twitter, provide free text fields where users can share brief information about themselves which, for many users, includes their pronouns. While sharing pronouns does not necessarily indicate that one is trans, as I will discuss in more detail in the forthcoming paragraphs, the practice still plays an important role in constructing transgender identity and/or positioning oneself in relation to broader ideological discourses surrounding trans acceptance (King and Crowley, 2024).

All of my participants chose to display their pronouns on at least one of their social media profiles, either in designated fields (where available), included in their bio, or through repurposing fields intended for other information. For example, Ethan and Lyra both used the 'location' field on their Twitter profiles to display their pronouns. Although the practice of sharing pronouns was consistent across all of my participants, the degree to which it alone serves as an index of transgender identity varies depending on the pronouns used by each participant. As cisnormativity presupposes that a gender identity is binary, aligned with assigned sex, and unchanging throughout an individual's life (Ericsson 2018), the presence of gender-neutral pronouns immediately marks a participant as transgender due to their deviation from this norm. Furthermore, several of my nonbinary participants chose to display multiple sets of pronouns on their profiles, positioning their gender identity as either fluid or otherwise unable to align wholly with a single gendered pronoun.

For participants whose pronoun use challenges dominant norms, displaying this information may be a necessity in order to minimise misgendering, but it can also be used to index

specific kinds of gender identity. Because pronouns are normatively associated with defined gender identities and expressions, using multiple sets can work in a process of adequation and distinction (Bucholtz and Hall 2005) to position a nonbinary individual in relation to recognisable gender categories and communicate information about their nonbinary or fluid gender identities. For example, although Colin does not choose to label his gender identity explicitly on his profiles, listing his pronouns as ‘he/they’ effectively indexes his identity as a nonbinary trans man; they position him as sufficiently similar to men to use the pronouns normatively associated with that identity, but dissimilar enough that those pronouns alone would not accurately reflect the aspects of his gender that go beyond binary categories. Similarly, Lyra’s use of three pronoun sets (‘she/they/he’) indexes a genderfluid identity that can encompass both femininity and masculinity, as well as move between and beyond them, though her transfeminine identity is foregrounded by the decision to place the normatively masculine pronoun last in the order. Lyra additionally refers to herself in the third person in her private Instagram bio, modelling the use of her preferred pronouns (Figure 5.1). For both of these participants, the order in which they’ve listed their pronouns communicates preference, though this this is not true of all multiple pronoun users, others of whom may have no preference and/or wish for their varying pronouns to be used equally. Additionally, the order in which Lyra listed her pronouns varied at times across online social contexts. However, particular norms have emerged in trans social media discourse as to what kinds of identities are indexed by different combinations of pronouns, and this is often extended to the order in which specific pronouns are listed (see Figure 5.11, discussed later in this chapter, as an example). In this way, the inclusion of pronouns on these participants’ profiles allows them to communicate nuanced information about their gender identity beyond simply informing others of how to refer to them, at least to other social media users with the contextual knowledge to interpret this.



Figure 5.3: Lyra’s bio on her personal Instagram account

In contrast, the inclusion of pronouns on social media profiles is not sufficient to unambiguously index a transgender identity for participants who exclusively use he/him or she/her pronouns, particularly in cases where other information that might be used in attributing gender, such as their name and/or appearance in their profile image, are aligned with normative expectations. However, in recent years the practice of displaying pronouns on one's social media profile – often referred to derisively as 'pronouns in bio' – has become associated with the 'culture war' over transgender acceptance (King and Crowley 2024), leading to the practice acquiring salience as an index of a progressive, pro-trans political stance among cisgender social media users. The act of specifying pronouns in such cases normalises the practice of sharing pronouns and challenges the expectation that pronouns can or should be assumed, working to reduce the degree to which specifying pronouns is a marked practice that positions nonbinary, gender non-conforming, and many transgender individuals as other. For this reason, sharing pronouns not only indexes a male or female identity for these participants, but helps to position them as an ally to transgender people who may not be able to rely on others to accurately determine their pronouns based on other cues.

This use of 'pronouns in bio' to index a trans-positive stance may explain its use by participants such as Blåhaj, who is not open about her transgender identity on her Twitter account. This is also true of Bee, who chooses to list their pronouns as 'he/him' on their work social media account despite these pronouns not aligning with their preferences in other contexts. This is particularly notable as the omission of pronouns in this case would not be a marked practice. While 'pronouns in bio' is often understood as indexing a specific ideological stance, their absence is unlikely to be interpreted as ideologically significant. Bee has made additional choices to index a more normatively masculine identity on their work account, such as using an alternative form of their preferred name and a photo in which they adopt a more masculine gender presentation, so it is unlikely that including pronouns was necessary to be interpreted as male by others and remain closeted. Instead, the inclusion of he/him pronouns allows Bee to index a trans-positive identity without exposing their own nonbinary identity, demonstrating how pronouns can be used to align oneself with the cause of trans liberation even while obscuring an individual's own transgender identity.

Another common option for social media users wishing to index certain information about their identity is through using related emoji on their profiles. This is especially common in user bios and used to communicate information such as a user's interests (🤘 📸 ⚽), sexuality and/or relationship status (🌈 💏 💍), or where they are from (national flag emoji) (Li *et al.*, 2020).). Among my participants, emoji use was infrequent, though both Ethan and Lyra used the transgender pride flag emoji (🏳️‍⚧️) to index their transgender identity on their profile, and Lyra commonly used emoji across platforms to index her interests (😈 🤘), stance (🤪 🦚), and queer identity (🏳️‍🌈 🏳️‍⚧️) (Figure 5.2). In many cases, emoji use built upon or complemented text, appearing at the start or end of phrases in a similar way to punctuation or bullet points and allowing information to be gleaned at a glance while also contributing to a playful, lighthearted register (Dresner and Herring, 2010; Logi and Zappavigna, 2023; Zappavigna and Logi, 2024).

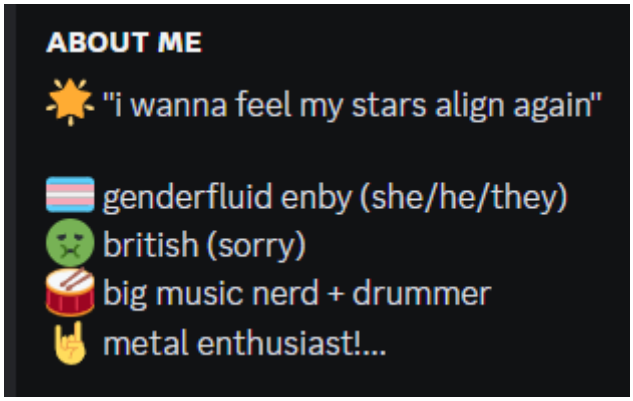


Figure 5.4: A screenshot of Lyra's Discord 'About Me' showing her use of several emoji indexing gender identity, interests, and affect

These examples show how seemingly simple ways of communicating one's identity, such as pronouns and flags, are used in complex ways by participants to position themselves as particular kinds of queer and trans people. This is increasingly the case with pronouns, both as the display of one's pronouns comes to be associated with specific political stances and as transgender social discourse begins to solidify new norms shaping how trans people communicate identity through pronoun-sharing. For participants such as Colin and Lyra, it is likely that the full indexical meaning of how they display their pronouns will only be accessible to others who are familiar with diverse transgender identities and transgender online discourse. However, displaying their pronouns in this way allows these participants to not only communicate the nuances of their nonbinary identities to sufficiently informed audience members, but also signal to them that they share that knowledge and its associated progressive values. Indexing shared knowledge and community membership was often an important part of how my participants positioned themselves as particular types of queer person, as well as queer people as a whole, which I will explore further in the following section.

5.2.2 Pride Selfies

In the previous section, I explored how participants relied on symbols to index their queer and trans identity on their profiles, drawing on norms of pronoun-sharing and common symbols such as pride flags in specific ways to concisely position themselves as specific kinds of queer and trans people. Social media posts, on the other hands, are often understood as much more ephemeral (Tagg *et al.*, 2017) and while participants' queer and trans identities were often made relevant in their social media posts, they rarely indexed these identities in such explicit ways. One key exception to this, however, was posts related to Pride.

Although not every participant's observation period intersected with Pride month (typically celebrated in June) or specific events they attended, every participant for whom I was collecting data during this period acknowledged Pride month in some capacity, either through original posts or sharing posts from others. In these posts, symbols such as Pride flags often featured heavily. The use of flags can also be understood as a display of membership to an imagined community (Anderson 1983), a concept proposed to describe how nations and national identities are built on a shared identity and sense of community despite the impossibility of any individual member coming into contact with every other

member of their population. Instead, a shared identity is constructed based on an idea of shared interests, values, and cultural practices on a larger scale, creating a sense of shared enterprise and solidarity even in the absence of direct interpersonal relationships. This concept of an imagined community can also be applied beyond the nation and is evidenced in everyday language use through the use of terms such as ‘queer community’ or ‘trans community,’ or the construction of a shared ‘LGBT+’ identity based on shared experiences of marginalisation and liberatory goals. For queer and trans people, the internal diversity and disagreement over what constitutes membership results in a vague and shifting imagined community that differs depending on who is speaking, and a single person may even be referring to multiple distinct queer communities when using the term (Barrett, 1997). Despite this ambiguity, all of my participants expressed that membership to a broader queer and/or trans community was personally important to them. Just as the national flag is used as a symbol for identification with a shared national identity, pride flags can also be used to index membership to an imagined community based on shared queer and/or transgender identity. Equally, just as ritualistic-ceremonial activities such as cultural holidays can serve an important role in strengthening a sense of community and shared national identity (Schatz and Lavine 2007), participation in community events such as Pride and Trans Day of Visibility (see Chapter 6.4) can provide an opportunity for individuals to position themselves as part of a wider imagined LGBT+ community, as evidenced in my data.

Among the posts made by participants featuring flags, the following two examples were immediately striking in their similarity. The first example (Figure 5.3), though predating my research, was shared twice by Gregory during the observation period, once as part of a TikTok image compilation and once on his Instagram story alongside other Pride-themed images, such as photos of his personal pride flag collection, to celebrate Pride month. The second example (Figure 5.4) was shared to Lyra’s private Instagram account as one of a collection of photos taken during her first time attending a Pride festival, mostly comprised of snapshots of decorated stalls, homemade signs, and Pride flags hung around the high street.

Many of the compositional similarities between the two images are hallmarks of the ‘selfie’ style (Zhao and Zappavigna, 2018b) arising from the physical constraints of having to hold and operate the camera in one’s own hand, restricting the maximum distance at which a photo can be taken without the use of additional technology and contributing to a recognisable, close-up ‘selfie’ framing. However, Zhao and Zappavigna (2018a) argue that, though this compositional style is likely not the result of deliberate expressive choices made by the photographer, this ‘selfie style’ nevertheless creates a unique social relationship between photographer and viewer in how it makes visible the subject’s role in producing these images, highlighting the selfie’s role as not only a representation of the subject, but also of the subject’s perspective on themselves and their experience (see Chapter 3.6.3). As such, the Pride selfie not only serves to record the participants’ presence at their respective Pride events but invites the viewer to consider the participants’ perspectives on their own queer and trans identities, foregrounding identification with an imagined community of others who share those identities and their associated liberatory goals.



Figure 5.3: Gregory's Pride selfie, posted to his public Instagram story



Figure 5.4: Lyra's Pride selfie, as part of a slideshow of photos of her day at Pride

Both selfies share additional similarities that mark them out as 'pride selfies,' an emergent genre of selfies on social media among online queer imagined communities. Both participants have chosen to tie a large pride flag across their shoulders like a cape, creating a symbolic attributive structure (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020) in which the pride flags are juxtaposed with the participant in such a way as to imbue them with the values represented by these symbols of queer and trans identity and pride. This allows the participants to render visible on their bodies identities which may otherwise be invisible (Penney, 2013) and engaging with this on a mass scale with others in their imagined community constitutes a symbolic activity in which members of an imagined community can express and strengthen alignment and belonging within that community (Schatz and Lavine, 2007). The same can, of course, be said for other flag-based cues, such as Lyra's face-paint and Gregory's 'rainbow sheep' t-shirt, though the visual prominence of the flag-as-cape appears deliberately difficult to ignore. Further, the styling of the flag as a cape carries additional symbolic significance given the association between capes and the prototypical 'superhero' character, positioning queer and trans identity as a source of strength and power. Sharing selfies such as these to social media allows participants to extend their engagement in this symbolic activity beyond the specific time and location of a Pride event, allowing geographically disparate members of the imagined community to congregate virtually through the sharing of similar images and expressions of Pride. The selfies in my data mirror common visual features in Pride selfies

seen across social media, with these shared features serving as a form of visual adequation, emphasising the shared enterprise aspect of community identity and aligning diverse LGBT+ people in a shared expression of community membership.

In my interview with Lyra, she referenced the generic nature of this style of Pride selfie specifically, positioning taking her own pride selfie as a key step in authenticating her queer identity:

Extract 5.8

1	**Lyra**	I liked getting all dressed up for it 'cause I got like some face paint for the
2		first time it was- (.) that felt like a- (.) it sounds really cheesy it's like a rite
3		of passage putting the fact paint on for the first time?
4	**Gabe**	@@ yeah
5	**Lyra**	like I've seen so many pictures like this like I'm doing it now (.) yay @@ (.)
6		y'know?
7	**Gabe**	yeah
8	**Lyra**	it- it sounds really like dumb but (.) I dunno it just felt like a (.) important
9		moment I guess (.) because (.) the most I've done like (.) publicly (.) is like
10		gone to a park meet up? (.) and posed with like a flag?
11	**Gabe**	mm
12	**Lyra**	but this was me like (.) putting myself actively in a place like (.) for queer
13		people?
14	**Gabe**	mhm yeah
15	**Lyra**	so it felt like quite a (.) it was like- (.) it was a- a big occasion

In this extract, Lyra describes applying her pansexual flag face-paint as 'like a rite of passage' (lines 2-3), a phrase typically used to describe major life events in which a person transitions from one social group to another, such as moving from childhood or adulthood. In Lyra's case, publicly donning their pride flags and participating in this symbolic activity with other queer people is positioned as a significant milestone in authenticating their membership to an imagined community of queer people, moving from passive consumption of others' photos to actively engaging with community practices. When Lyra says 'I've seen so many pictures like this like I'm doing it now (.) yay @@' (line 5), Lyra foregrounds the significance of the images they had seen on social media and positions them as an aspirational goal. Their emphasis on the quantity of these images further highlights how this style of Pride selfie has accrued symbolic value and ritual status through repetition, increasing its significance as a 'rite of passage' for Lyra as a queer person.

Lyra contrasts the significance of this display of pride (both offline and on) with their previous attempts at participating in a queer imagined community when they say 'the most I've done like (.) publicly (.) is like gone to a park meet up? (.) and posed with like a flag?' (lines 9-10). Their framing of adopting these visual signifiers of Pride as 'the most I've done' positions their Pride selfie as more significant than anything they had done prior. Their emphasis on the verb 'done' foregrounds their own action, reinforced by their use of the adverb 'actively' in their framing of attending Pride in line 12 as 'putting myself actively in a place like (.) for

queer people?'. Though one could argue that attending a park meet-up is similarly putting oneself actively in a place for queer people, Lyra frames the two events very differently in terms of their own agency. Earlier in the extract (lines 1-3), Lyra describes the preparation for their first Pride event and highlights the act of applying facepaint in the colours of a pride flag. Unlike having 'posed with like a flag', which implies separation between Lyra and the flag, Lyra's Pride selfie shows them physically adorned with their chosen flags. This further illustrates the symbolic significance of placing the flag on the body as a way to connect individual identity with imagined community membership through the embodied nature of this shared practice, as well its connection to the social media practices of other queer social media users.

These examples show how my participants drew on the shared social media practices of an online imagined community of queer and transgender people to position themselves as queer and trans individuals in ways that are specifically relevant to the social media context. Though the Pride events these participants attended were hosted offline, the specific ways in which these participants chose to create and share multimodal records of their present using a shared 'Pride selfie' format highlights the status of this practice as one foregrounding shared experience and community membership. Notably, in Gregory's case, the Pride selfie he shared was taken at a Pride event the previous year and was reuploaded to mark the beginning of Pride month, foregrounding the function of this selfie as a way to index shared queer identity rather than merely document his attendance at a specific event. Though this analysis has focused on Pride selfies specifically, the idea of an imagined online community of queer and trans people with recognisable social media self-representation practices was present in other aspects of my participants' queer identity construction, such as the construction of transitioning identities I discuss in the following section.

5.2.3 Constructing a Transitioning Identity

Shared social media practices were similarly used by two of my participants, Gregory and Ethan, to construct a transitioning identity over an extended timeline. In the following examples, these participants take advantage of the persistence and replicability of digital media to recontextualise past social media posts as part of an ongoing, linear transition, drawing on common social media frameworks for producing transition narratives and constructing authentic transitioning identities.

In previous research exploring how transgender men constructed their transition on social media, Horak (2014) identified several common conventions among transition-related posts, arguing that the transition update vlogs and retrospective transition timeline montages and slideshows common within the genre narrativize gender transition as a linear progression; they typically move from pre-transition distress to achieving harmony between external gender presentation and internal self-perception, and embodying one's 'true self'. Horak refers to the alternative temporality produced by this narrative as 'hormone time' due to its close association with hormone replacement therapy, though this narrative structure can also be employed by trans people to structure retellings of their transition based on different milestones where HRT is not relevant. What is most significant, in my view, is the construction of transition as beginning with a point of rupture and moving forwards to the goal of becoming one's authentic self. The prevalence of conventions which reinforce this narrative, such as organising vlogs based on how long the creator has been on HRT ('X

months on T'), has been corroborated by other work (Raun, 2015a; Borck and Moore, 2019), and was most apparent in my dataset in the posts made by one participant, Gregory.

Of all of my participants, Gregory most closely adhered to these norms of transgender social media content, sharing monthly vlogs on his TikTok and Instagram accounts that documented his experience on testosterone and frequently uploading 'transition timeline' montages. These allowed him to construct an identity in transition primarily through a focus on ongoing, progressive masculinisation throughout his time on testosterone and his transition as a whole. One example that foregrounds Gregory's transition progress in a notable way is a video made using TikTok's 'duet' function, where he reposts one of his previous transition timeline videos alongside a new video that plays simultaneously with the two videos displayed side-by-side (Figures 5.5; 5.6; 5.7). This duet was created to mark the milestone of having recently started testosterone gel, with the juxtaposition of the two videos framing this as an 'update' to the progress documented in his previous transition timeline.

In the duet, the older video shows a series of photos of Gregory in the time since coming out, culminating in a short video filmed with a filter that makes his eyes appear rainbow coloured. In this video, Gregory lip-syncs to a song by Fall Out Boy, *The Last of the Real Ones*, miming exaggerated swagger and confidence before waving a transgender flag as the video ends. In the newer video, shown on the left, Gregory motions as if to greet the camera before holding up a bottle of testosterone gel and positioning it to show a close-up of the label. Enabled by the simultaneous nature of video recording and playback in TikTok duets, Gregory then reacts in real time to his previous video as it plays, laughing slightly as his former self dances and lip-syncs before nodding with a proud smile on his face as his former self waves the transgender flag.

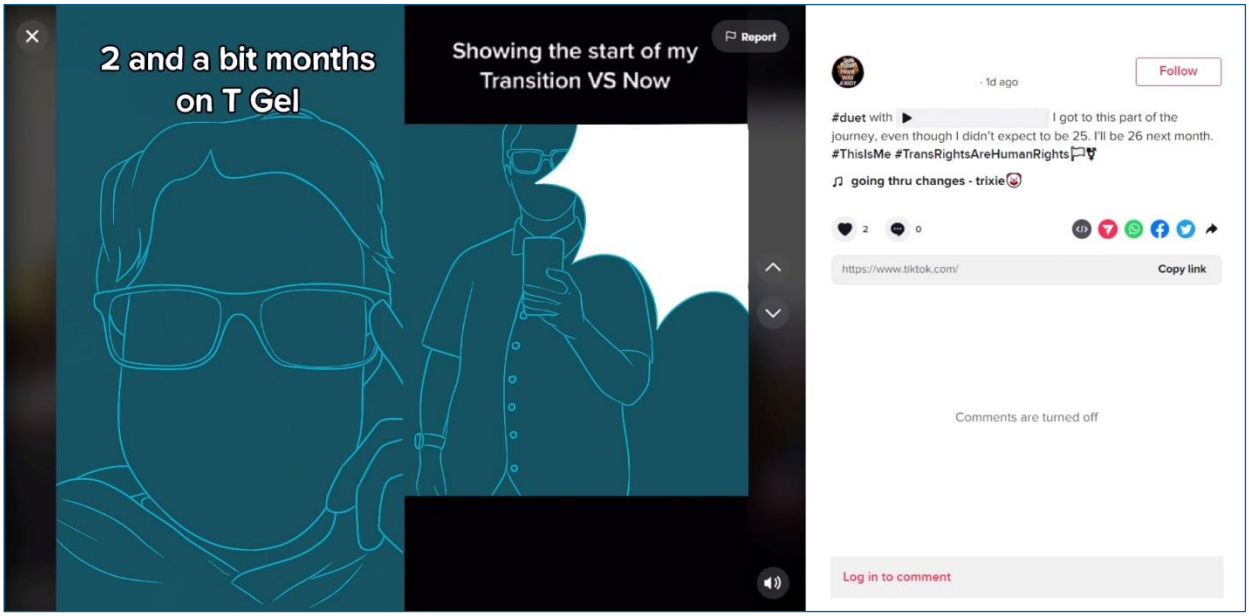


Figure 5.5: A screenshot taken of the beginning of a duet TikTok posted by Gregory, showing a still of the new video on the left and the first image in the older transition timeline, which is partially obscured by glare.

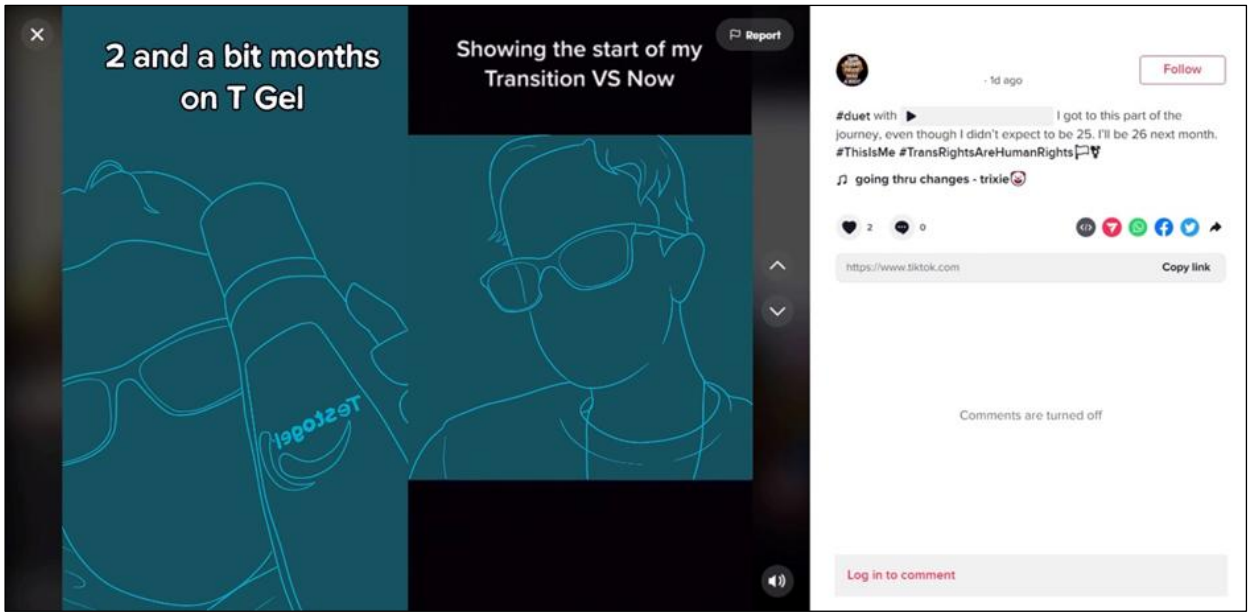


Figure 5.6: A screenshot taken in the middle of Gregory's duet TikTok in which he can be seen holding up a bottle of Testogel to the camera in the left video, with a selfie from the middle of his transition timeline shown on the right

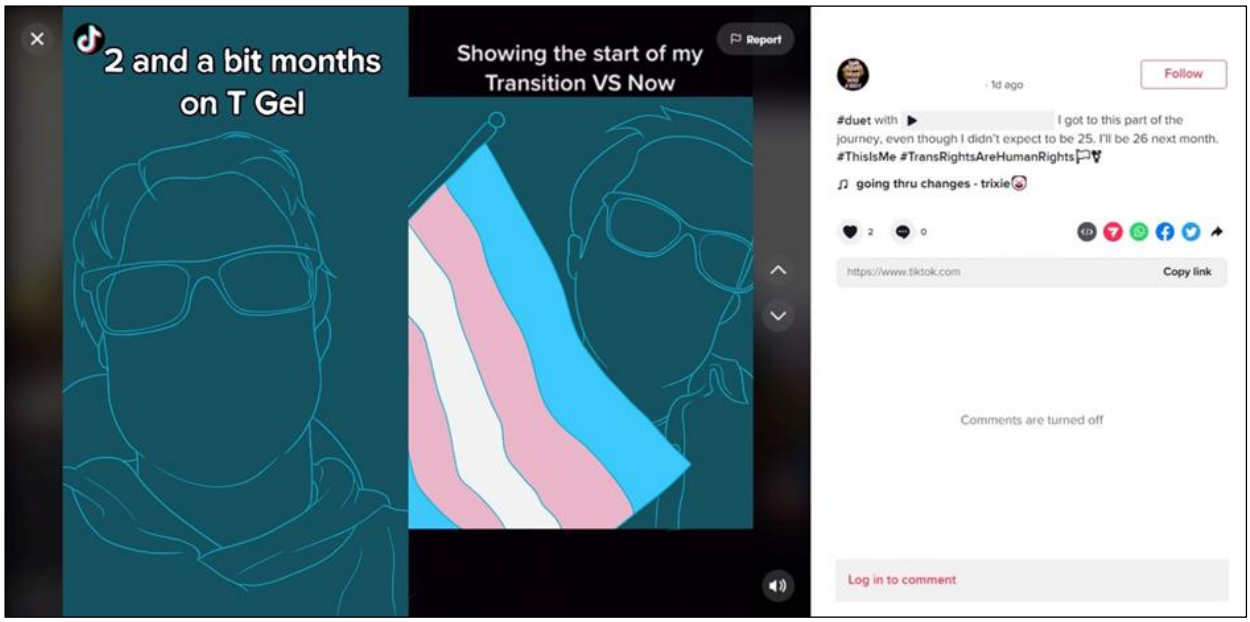


Figure 5.7: A screenshot taken at the conclusion of Gregory's duet TikTok, showing him nodding and smiling on the left in response to his younger self pulling out a transgender flag following his lip-sync at the end of his transition timeline montage

To focus first on the older transition timeline, it is notable that the images chosen do not show a significant change in Gregory's gender presentation – he has a similar short hairstyle and dresses in normatively masculine clothing throughout, even in the earliest images. However, the images Gregory has chosen for his timeline nevertheless do construct a progression towards a more authentic self. This begins with their composition, with images earlier in the timeline placing distance between Gregory and the viewer, such as a mirror selfie in which glare from a window partially obscures his face (Figure 5.5) and a full-body image taken from a distance. As the timeline progresses, these images are replaced by

increasingly close up compositions showing only Gregory's head and shoulders, and the timeline culminates in a video where Gregory frequently emotes directly to the camera, at times getting so close that his face fills the frame. This reduction of physical distance creates a sense of increasing social closeness between Gregory and the viewer (Kress and van Leeuwen 2020), visually indexing traits associated with intimacy such as honesty and openness. In combination with his increased expressiveness, Gregory manipulates the simulated relationship between himself and the viewer to create the effect that he is 'coming out of his shell', visually indexing his growing confidence and openness as he embraces his trans identity.

In the final video of his initial transition timeline (Figure 5.7), Gregory indexes both a queer and trans identity through the incorporation of rainbow imagery and a transgender flag. As both the rainbow and transgender flag are widely recognised for their symbolic value, they form a symbolic attributive structure, signalling not only that Gregory is queer and trans but also indexing self-acceptance through the association of these symbols with the concept of pride. This stance is further indexed by Gregory's choice of a song centring themes of authenticity and the use of the 'lip-sync' style popular in TikTok videos (Darvin, 2022), adopting exaggerated and theatrical body movements and expressions that suggest confidence and aligning himself with the messaging of the song by performing its words as if they were his own. In this way, Gregory constructs an authentic, proud, transgender identity, which is differentiated from his more distance, reserved earlier transition self.

Similarly to the use of the transgender flag and rainbow iconography, the bottle of Testogel in his later video (Figure 5.3) also serves an attributive function. Raun (2015) argues that the conventions of transmasculine transition vlogs position testosterone *as* masculinity due to its association with visible, bodily indices of masculinity, with taking testosterone often framed as directly taking masculinity into the body. This allows the bottle of testosterone gel to serve as a visual index of Gregory's increasing progress towards his desired masculine embodiment. Furthermore, as testosterone gel can usually only be obtained in the UK on prescription, the bottle of gel further serves to authenticate Gregory's transgender identity by demonstrating that his self-identification has been validated by those with medical authority who serve as gatekeepers to gender-affirming care.

Gregory's caption reinforces a linear construction of transition progress, drawing on the metaphor of transition as a journey that also appeared frequently in my interview data among other participants' constructions of their transition. In Gregory's case specifically, being on testosterone is positioned as a new 'part of the journey' that he has reached, while the use of the determiners 'the' and 'this' position the journey and its constituent parts as both specific and widely known, positioning Gregory as proceeding with his transition in a normative way. The 'journey' metaphor reinforces the idea that gender transition is a linear progression from one state to a final destination, aligning with the adoption of dominant conventions in Gregory's transition-related content to reinforce the 'hormone time' narrative and drawing on transnormative constructions of gender transition. This is further strengthened by how Gregory chooses to construct a past version of himself Gregory positions his past self as hopeless and someone who 'did not expect to be 25', implying past struggles with suicidality and depression which he frequently references when discussing how he felt prior to and early in his transition. This past self serves as a reference point, allowing Gregory to contrast his present self - someone who has been able to transition and access gender-affirming care, is about to turn 26, and is depicted smiling - with a

constructed past self whose distress and hopelessness is foregrounded, positioning his present happiness as a result of his transition 'journey' and aligning with the 'it gets better' narrative prominent in mainstream constructions of queer and trans life experiences (Gal, Shifman and Kampf, 2016; Haimson, 2020).

Another example of a participant employing this linear narrative to construct an authentic transitioning identity comes from a tweet made by Ethan, looking back at his 'first male haircut' (Figure 5.8). Getting a short haircut for the first time is frequently constructed as a significant milestone in a transmasculine person's early transition, but dominant norms about which hairstyles are considered appropriate for men and women make it difficult for many transmasculine people to achieve a haircut that aligns with their desired masculine gender presentation while still being perceived as female by hairstylists. This results in many transmasculine people expressing a somewhat ambivalent stance towards this supposedly gender-affirming milestone that is frequently used as the basis for jokes on social media, such as the examples below (Figure 5.9). By taking a humorous stance towards his 'god-awful' first haircut and highlighting the mismatch between his expectations and what is shown in the images, Ethan indexes membership to a broader imagined community of transmasculine people based both on this constructed shared experience and his knowledge of how this experience is frequently framed in social media discourse and memes.



Figure 5.8: A tweet made by Ethan featuring a pre-made digital collage of two photographs taken at the hair salon following his first short haircut.

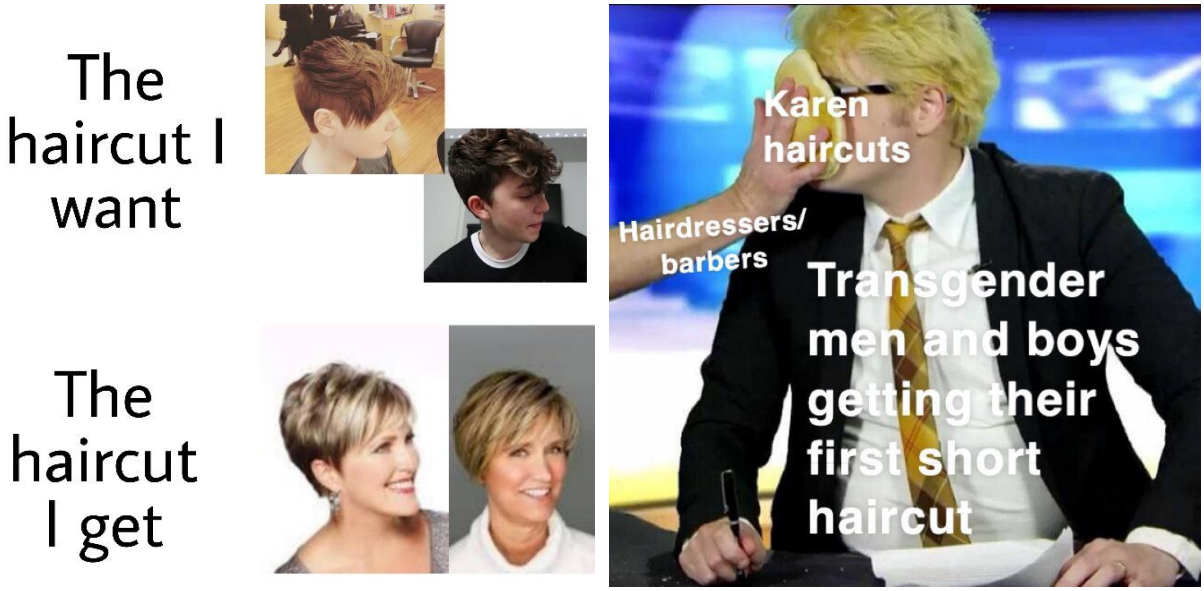


Figure 5.9: Two memes made by transmasculine people about haircuts, posted to Reddit on the subreddits r/traaaaaaannnnnnnnns and r/ftm.

Additionally, Ethan's likening of viewing these images in retrospect to 'analysing a moment in history' not only positions this haircut as a notable event but also attributes additional significance to the details he chooses to highlight in his tweet, suggesting that they are not merely incidental but rather add up to a particular meaning or interpretation of the event as a whole. This interpretation, however, is only accessible to those who have the required contextual knowledge to interpret it. Memes and jokes shared online frequently require familiarity existing meme templates, cultural events, or other contextual knowledge in order to 'decode' the humour (Lou, 2017) and creating posts that are only accessible to an in-group with pre-existing knowledge is often used strategically by social media users to position themselves as members of a particular group (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). In this case, Ethan draws attention to his younger self's clothing to position himself as a dedicated fan of particular YouTube creators with subcultural significance: Troye Sivan, a musician, actor, and vlogger; and Daniel Howell and Phil Lester, two creators who collaborated as 'Dan and Phil' to create videos across several YouTube channels. These creators, themselves gay men, were particularly successful on the platform during the 2010s and attracted large numbers of young queer fans on popular social media sites such as Instagram and Tumblr. Because of this, these creators were iconic figures of queer youth culture on social media at the time. In his interviews, Ethan positions his membership to these fandoms, particularly Dan and Phil, as part of the normative experience for transgender people in his age group, joking that he 'was very much on Dan and Phil Instagram as most transgender teens ended up being'. Ethan's foregrounding of his younger self's identity as a fan of these creators aligns him with this construction of 'typical' experience shared by transgender teenagers at the time, drawing on this shared experience to create both humour and a sense of solidarity with an imagined transgender audience.

Further, describing this event as a 'moment in history' serves to separate this event from the present day, emphasising temporal separation and positioning these older photos as a product of a different time. This is further strengthened by the temporally anchored nature of the fan identity indexed by his younger self's YouTuber merchandise, tied to both a specific period of time on social media in the 2010s and a specifically 'teenage' demographic. This

separation allows Ethan to differentiate his present self from this representation of his past self, with his affectionately mocking stance indexing his greater knowledge and experience with achieving his desired masculine gender expression in the present. Like Gregory, Ethan draws on common narratives of linear progress through transition, positioning his less successfully attempts to achieve his desired masculine gender presentation as temporary and time-bound, as well as part of a normative transition experience.

Notably, Ethan constructs his transitioning identity without any reference to HRT or other gender-affirming healthcare. During his participation in my research, Ethan had been unable to access gender identity services for several years due administrative delays during his transferral from youth to adult gender services, preventing him from beginning HRT. Despite this, Ethan does not position his transition as stalled but rather highlights alternative milestones through which he has made progress towards his authentic gendered self, positioning himself as agentive despite facing barriers outside of his control. Similarly, though Gregory does include beginning HRT as a milestone in his update to his transition timeline, his earlier timeline foregrounds his increasing confidence and pride to construct progress towards his authentic self. This focus on non-medical milestones continues even in his updated post, with his caption emphasising his improving mental health and having overcome suicidal ideation. In this way, both participants resist dominant transnormative constructions of transition that privilege major medical interventions, such as hormones and surgery, and instead authenticate their transgender and transitioning identities according to alternative milestones in their personal transitions.

In these two examples, imagined communities play a significant part in how these participants construct these milestones. Gregory makes use of Pride flags and rainbow iconography in a similar way to the examples discussed in section 5.2.2, drawing on these symbols of both queer identity and Pride to visually index his own progress towards embracing his identity as a gay transgender man. In Ethan's case, the construction of shared experience with an imagined community of teenage Dan and Phil fans allows him to index a recognisably youthful, naïve identity for his younger self, reinforcing the separation between himself in the present and his early-transition self. By highlighting aspects of this 'transgender teen' identity that he positions as 'typical', such as enjoying Troye Sivan and Dan and Phil, Ethan reinforces his construction of his 'god-awful' haircut as a normal result of inexperience in early transition, which his historical framing and mocking stance suggests is far behind him. Although the shared identities of these participants differ significantly in terms of their recognisability to a mainstream audience, both are appropriate for each participant's imagined audience. Gregory aims to reach a larger audience on his public TikTok and works to extend his potential reach through the use of hashtags, while Ethan tweets to an imagined audience of his friends and others like him on Twitter (see discussion in Chapter 4.3.2). In this way, my participants draw on different communities in their construction of an authentic transgender identity according to their social goals and what they anticipate will be most meaningful to their specific social media audiences.

5.3 Memes and Communities

5.3.1 Defining 'Memes'

In the previous section, I noted that one participant, Ethan, drew on the how the experience of getting one's first gender-affirming haircut was represented in memes shared in transgender (and particularly transmasculine) online communities of practice. Memes are a

diverse genre of online media which have come to play an important role in social media identity construction. While the term ‘meme’ has long since entered mainstream use on social media (Christopher, 2019), its precise definition is notoriously difficult to pin down, in part due to rapid changes in social media technology accelerating the production and diversification of memes beyond the established formats and dedicated online communities of the past (Miltner, 2018). For this reason, any definition must be broad and flexible enough to encompass memes in a variety of different formats – texts, photos, multimodal social media posts, videos, etc. – and the inherent unpredictability of a concept defined in part by the role of creative remixing and reimagining of previous ideas. One frequently cited definition proposed by Shifman (2013) brings together shared characteristics to define an internet meme as:

> (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.
>
> (Shifman, 2013, p. 42)

I find this definition particularly useful for its highlighting of the three dimensions that can be imitated and creatively reimagined as new users contribute to an internet meme. Content refers to the ideas and ideologies conveyed by a specific text, while form refers to how the content is presented in terms of its visual and auditory elements and how this information is organised. Stance, finally, refers to how a creator positions themselves in relation to their own contribution, their audience, and the actual or potential contributions of others. This encompasses elements such as whether a message is delivered as sincere or ironic, serious or humorous, intended to persuade or ridicule, and so on, as well as ideas about what kind of person is expected to consume and participate in any given meme. This allows for analysis of a wide range of different individual contributions to a given meme, as well as analysis of which dimensions these individual contributions manipulate.

It should be noted, however, that this academic use of the term ‘meme’ to refer to the broader collection of content to which individual items belong is narrower than its use in everyday speech, where it typically can refer to both these clusters of content but also to individual examples of images, jokes, videos, and so on (Wark and Wark, 2019). This broader use is reflected in my conversation with participants, with ‘this meme’ most often understood to refer to a specific instance of meme shared as part of an individual social media post. In my data, examples of multimodal memes were typically shared from other users using a platform’s inbuilt sharing functionality, such as Twitter’s retweet and quote tweet functions or Instagram’s ‘share to story’ but occasionally were reposted from other sources as original posts. None of my participants shared any multimodal meme posts of their own creation during the observation period.

5.3.2 Trans Memes

In the following two examples, I explore how my participants explicitly draw on memes about transgender identity and experience to position themselves in relation to particular memetic constructions of transgender identity.

The first, Figure 5.10, is retweeted by Blåhaj. The post itself is a contribution to the broader ‘Barbenheimer’ meme that emerged on social media in anticipation of the release of two major films, *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*, on the same weekend in 2023. While the meme had

no set structure, the tonal dissonance between these two films prompted a comedic response that attracted mainstream media attention and inspired a social media trend for combining the two films in absurd ways. In this example, similarly composed images of the two lead characters are placed side by side with the caption, '3 years on hrt 😍', invoking the 'before and after' structure commonly used to demonstrate changes associated with transition and gender-affirming medical care (Horak, 2014). In sharing this meme, Blåhaj indexes her own trans identity by demonstrating familiarity with common in-group post types and initialisms. However, the fact that this post can be contextualised as part of a larger meme allows her to do this while also offering a degree of plausible deniability since Blåhaj is not open about her trans identity on Twitter. Stories of gender transition in mainstream media have historically foregrounded the idea of shocking transformations (Zottola, 2021), making the concept an appropriate fit for a meme based around contrast, particularly given the gendered connotations of *Oppenheimer* and *Barbie* as 'masculine' and 'feminine' films in social media discourse.



Figure 5.10: Retweet by Blåhaj featuring close-up stills from Oppenheimer and Barbie showing the main characters side by side

Although the post does not contain any overt statements about trans identity, aspects of its form suggest a trans-affirming stance. For example, the caption is written as if the post was authored by the character Barbie reflecting on her own transition, using the emoji '😍' to index joy, self-love, and perhaps gratitude. This recontextualization of Barbie as a transgender woman is particularly significant given the character's infamous association with hegemonic femininity, challenging essentialist constructions of gender by troubling the association between idealised femininity and female birth assignment. Though the significant contrast between the normative gender presentations of these cisgender actors in this 'transition timeline' does echo transnormative discourses in which the goal of gender transition is to achieve a normative gender presentation and pass for cisgender (Johnson,

2016; Jones, 2019), it also exposes the constructed nature of the gender binary by suggesting that a single individual could ‘successfully’ embody both masculinity and femininity.



Figure 5.11: Retweet by Colin featuring a ‘two queues’ meme

Figure 5.11, shared by Colin, is another example in which a meme post is used to resist transnormative discourses and construct a positive trans identity. In this example, the gender *non*conformity of trans bodies is foregrounded but positioned as a desirable trait. The image makes use of a meme template depicting two reception counters, only one of which has a large queue. The two counters are then labelled according to the stance the creator wishes to communicate, positioning one option as significantly more desirable than the other. Though this template originally gained popularity among right-wing communities and was intended to criticise mainstream attitudes (Know Your Meme, 2017), it has since been recontextualised and used to positively evaluate the more popular option, as is the case in this example. Here, the two counters are labelled ‘boypussy’ and ‘pussy’, positioning the former as more desirable.

It could be argued that the construction of trans identity in this post draws on fetishising discourses by referring to sex with both transmasculine people and women metonymically as ‘boypussy’ and ‘pussy’, backgrounding their personhood and, in the case of trans men, specifically foregrounding the gender nonconforming nature of their bodies as the source of their desirability. However, in the context of a tweet originally posted by a transmasculine sex worker and retweeted by Colin, a nonbinary trans man who frequently explicitly associates his transgender identity with his construction of himself as sexually desirable, these

objectifying and dehumanising discourses are reclaimed and recontextualised as humorous, hyperbolic self-celebration and positive in-group evaluation.

In both examples, these meme posts position trans people as desirable: explicitly, as in Figure 5.11, or implicitly through the representation of a hypothetical trans woman as a character associated with idealised femininity. While drawing on different discourses to construct transgender identity, both affirm the idea that transgender people are the gender they identify themselves as and promote solidarity among trans people through references to in-group language and practices. In turn, these meme posts serve to index a resistant identity and reflect alternative norms among trans social media users that challenge dominant cisnormative ideology.



Figure 5.12: A retweet by Colin featuring a character from a Tokusatsu series overlaid with colourful text

In some cases, memes were used to communicate a more explicitly counter-cisnormative stance, with the posts themselves framed as a direct response to specific transphobic discourses. This is achieved primarily through the tactic of illegitimation, as in the two examples from Colin (Figure 5.12) and Gregory (Figure 5.13).

These posts selectively draw on hegemonic norms and ideologies about what is valuable and acceptable in society to position transphobic individuals as deficient or deviant in ways that disqualify their arguments from serious consideration. In Colin's case, a common claim that is frequently used to justify the misgendering of trans people – 'pronouns are confusing' – is taken at face value and used to position those who use it as ignorant about the ways language works, drawing on the stigma associated with those who are uneducated and/or

illiterate to undermine the legitimacy of their position. In Gregory's case, both the image and the text of the tweet he has quoted draw on cultural norms regarding privacy and sexual propriety to position those promoting essentialist views of gender as inappropriately concerned with the genitals of strangers. As such, these anti-trans views are not presented as valid positions worthy of respect but rather as evidence of intellectual deficiency or sexual deviance. This strategy may be a response to a key tactic used by UK anti-trans lobbying groups wherein they position themselves as ordinary people who are merely raising 'reasonable concerns' (McLean 2021) while constructing trans people as obsessive, aggressive, and delusional (Shaw 2023). The specific form of these anti-trans meme posts counters this 'reasonable' positioning by humorously characterising anti-trans ideology as incompatible with literacy and politeness, thus positioning trans acceptance and affirmation as the more 'normal' stance.



Figure 5.13: A quote tweet from Gregory in which he shares a meme using a template inspired by a scene in the show Gravity Falls

While both of these posts may be seen to serve a similar purpose, the contexts in which they were shared suggest that they are likely intended to achieve different interactional goals. To further explore this, I turn to an extract from Gregory's second interview, during which he told me he had saved this image from a 'bank of useful memes' he found on Twitter:

Extract 5.9

1	**Gabe**	with this meme in this specific tweet erm (.) is your target audience for this
2		meme (.) people who already agree with you and will laugh along with
3		you? (.) or people who might have the opinion that is being criticised in the
4		tweet you're quoting?
5	**Gregory**	erm? (.) probably both (.) because I know some people will laugh at it and
6		some people might (.) actually:: think (.) like (.) maybe that is really creepy
7		o::r y'know (.) maybe I should think about what I'm doing

Here, Gregory notes that he shared the image in Figure 5.13 not only to make light of the unpleasantness of dealing with the kind of transphobic rhetoric referenced in the tweet to which he is responding, but also to potentially influence the stances of others who might otherwise have been persuaded by such discourse. He positions himself as comparatively uncertain that the second outcome will occur, as indicated by his use of the modal verb 'might' (line 6) and the hedge 'maybe' (line 7) in contrast to the certainty of 'I know some people will laugh at it' (line 5). The potentially persuasive power of the post's illegitimation is foregrounded in lines 5-7, with Gregory's suggestion that 'some people' who reproduce transphobic discourses may be doing so because they have yet to 'actually:: think' (line 6). This positions these anti-trans discourses as dominant, but also potentially moveable if alternative viewpoints are communicated effectively. The likelihood of this outcome is increased though Gregory's use of the hashtag '#TransRightsAreHumanRights' in his post to increase its visibility and mark it as part of the discussion about trans rights on Twitter, which may contribute to this post's comparatively high view count compared to many of Gregory's tweets.

Colin, in contrast, does not have a public Twitter account and only accepts follow requests from people with whom he has a pre-existing relationship. Considering this, it is highly unlikely that he intended for his tweet in Figure 5.12 to reach anyone who might earnestly reproduce transphobic talking points. Furthermore, the humour in this image relies upon taking the claim that 'pronouns are confusing' entirely at face value and divorced from its implied criticism of trans and gender non-conforming people who use pronouns in a 'confusing' way. The anti-trans argument that 'pronouns are confusing' does not, of course, take issue with the comprehensibility of pronouns as a unit of language. The claim instead works to reinforce essentialist understandings of gendered language by characterising a connection between gendered pronouns, binary gender, and assigned sex as obvious and common-sense while positioning trans people's language use as nonsensical and illegitimate, thus justifying the act of misgendering. As such, it is unlikely that this would succeed in persuading anyone who might sincerely make this claim. Instead, this post rejects this implicit messaging while also making light of a frequently shared negative experience among trans people, helping to construct a positive shared identity.

This mocking stance is further reinforced by the multimodal aspects of the image. The character's gaze is directed at the viewer as they smirk and point, creating an imaginary relationship between the character and the viewer as if the viewer is being invited to partake in the laughter. The character's incredulous smirk also helps to convey the sarcastic tone of the text, taking advantage of the additional social information conveyed through facial expression and body language in visual media (Bourlai and Herring, 2014) to minimise the

likelihood that the text will be interpreted at face value, further reinforced by the playful connotations of the colourful font chosen. Taken together, the image creates a sense that the viewer is laughing with the creator, implicitly positioning the audience as aligned with the trans affirming stance of the post.

The difference in imagined audience is also reflected in the contextual information required to interpret the meme (Lou, 2017). While the relationship between an evaluation of information about strangers' genitals and an evaluation of transphobic beliefs might not be immediately obvious to someone unfamiliar with anti-trans discourse, the fact that Gregory chose to share Figure 5.13 as a quote tweet makes available the contextual information required to interpret the message with little prior knowledge; Gregory directly links his image to another tweet in which anti-trans campaigners are constructed as obsessed with the genitals of strangers, building on this original tweet and relying on its contents to make his stance clear. In Colin's case, the text of the original tweet in Figure 5.12 alludes to the fact that image is being shared as an 'appropriate' response to an unspecifies event, but also that the original poster has decided to 'trot this back out', emphasising that this is not the first time such a response has been warranted. The knowledge of recurring criticisms of transgender people's pronoun use is therefore required to infer the claims that this meme likely responds to and to interpret the image as a mockery specifically of anti-trans arguments. This requirement for extensive prior knowledge limits the meme's accessibility and therefore its potential impact as a persuasive tool. Instead, it facilitates the construction of shared community knowledge built through experiences of marginalisation and allows Colin to index an authentic trans identity built on this shared knowledge. Creating and engaging with memes that resist oppressive hegemonic discourse in this way can act as a coping strategy to provide comfort and increase resilience among those with marginalised perspectives even in cases where such individuals do not expect to change public opinion (Denisova, 2019). In this instance, while both posts construct a positive, resistant trans identity and comfort, humour, and solidarity among trans people, Colin's is more specifically tailored to a trans audience.

5.3.3 Indexing Online Community Membership

In addition to the previous examples in which participants explicitly invoke transgender identity and/or transition, the following examples explore how participants can use memes to position themselves in relation to other online communities, in turn positioning themselves as particular kinds of transgender social media users.

The first example, Figure 5.14, shows a post shared by Ash referencing a specific scene in the BBC TV show *Sherlock* with which viewers must be familiar in order to understand the joke. By retweeting this meme and demonstrating this understanding, Ash is able to position themself as a fan of the show. However, the text of tweet ('i'm so sorry if you understand what this is referencing') communicates an apologetic stance that appears at odds with the unproblematic construction of positive fan identity. Although I lacked the contextual information to interpret this meme myself, I opted to discuss this post with Ash during the stimulated recall task due to the infrequency with which they shared posts like this. In discussing this post, Ash highlighted how this apologetic, self-deprecating stance indexes a specifically queer fan identity, reflecting a shared attitude among *Sherlock*'s queer fanbase following the show's conclusion. Ash constructs a shared experience of hurt and betrayal among queer fans due to a widespread perception that the show engaged in 'queerbaiting',

a tactic used by those involved in creating and marketing a piece of media to draw in viewers seeking LGBT+ narratives by including hints, symbolism, and jokes to suggest a queer relationship or storyline while never confirming – or outright denying – that the relevant characters are anything other than heterosexual (Brennan 2019).



Figure 5.14: A meme retweeted by Ash using an image of Jason Momoa sneaking up on Henry Cavill at a movie premier with white text overlaid

In the case of *Sherlock*, the negative reaction to the denial of a romantic relationship between its two male protagonists and accusations of queerbaiting were so widespread that they have been covered in academic writing on the subject (Nielson 2019), and Ash recommended a YouTube video on the topic with over 2 million views at the time of writing. Because of this, the act of apologising reflects the constructed shared experience of being disappointed by the show among queer fans, allowing Ash to index a specifically *queer* fan as discussed in the following extract:

Extract 5.10

1	**Gabe**	if uh (.) why do you think the show resonated so much with (.) queer fans
2		given- if that was sort of (.) the show's attitude?
3	**Ash**	it's very notorious queerbaiting
4	**Gabe**	mm?

[…]

Ash it feels like even more of a betrayal in that they definitely (.) played on that? (.) u::h (1.0) and used it as part of the publicity for series (.) going forward?

Gabe yeah

Ash it's one of those weird situations where the showrunners both benefited from the queer fandom and uh the queer fanbase and queerbaiting (.) but also explicitly we::re very much (.) ugh these people are silly and stupid for thinking this so in series three in the first episode- end of series two Sherlock (.) pretends to take his own life (.) due to situations that happen in the show?

Gabe yeah?

Ash at the start of series three um::m (.) there's an episode where they're making- make- basically making fun of the fandom for making lots and lots of theories about how Sherlock survived? the fall? (.) and one of them is him and Moriarty making out on the rooftop a::nd it is very much (.) a dig at (.) queer interpretations?

Gabe yeah?

Ash like it's- it's- it's- it's meant as a joke but (.) looking back at it now it feels fairly mean spirited

In this extract, Ash constructs a collective identity in 'the queer fandom' (line 10) based on a shared experience of perceived exploitation on behalf of the *Sherlock* showrunners. While many fans may be dissatisfied with a show's ending, Ash positions their own experience as significant and specifically tied to their queer identity through labelling it 'very notorious queerbaiting' (line 3). The use of the label 'queerbaiting' in itself characterises the actions of the showrunners as intentionally targeting queer people and legitimates this as a recognised tactic, while the intensifier 'very' and adjective 'notorious' position their experience as a particularly egregious and impactful example. Ash differentiates the negative experiences of 'the queer fandom' from 'the fandom' more broadly in lines 16-20, explaining how the show parodied various fan theories in one of its episodes. Ash contrasts 'making fun of the fandom for making lots and lots of theories about how Sherlock survived' (lines 16-17) with making 'a dig at (.) queer interpretations?' (line 20), referring to the latter as 'fairly mean spirited' (line 23). Ash's use of 'theories' to describe fans' speculation about a specific plot detail positions these as proposed explanations which may be proven or disproven, while 'queer interpretations' suggests a more subjective, holistic way of reading the text of the show as a whole. Similarly, framing this mockery as 'a dig' erases any ambiguity present in 'making fun' as to whether queer fans are intended to be in on the joke, positioning the showrunners as explicitly critical and intending to hurt or embarrass. This not only constructs a clear opposition between 'the showrunners' and the 'the queer fandom' but alsopositions 'the queer fandom' as uniquely delegitimated within the text of the show. This works to connect the regretful stance communicated by the tweet's text to this constructed shared experience, revealing how Ash views 'the queer fandom' as a distinct imagined community to which they belong.

Ultimately, the actual content of the meme image is rendered secondary to the construction of a shared queer fandom identity. While any *Sherlock* fan could appreciate why plugging in one's phone might trigger the memory of a related scene in a show they had enjoyed, the text of the tweet, combined with Ash's identity as a queer trans person, recontextualises this as an unwelcome reminder of their experience of feeling othered within the fandom and signals solidarity and shared experience specific to 'the queer fandom'. In this way, a meme ostensibly about a TV show comes to index Ash's queer identity, at least to those in their in-group.

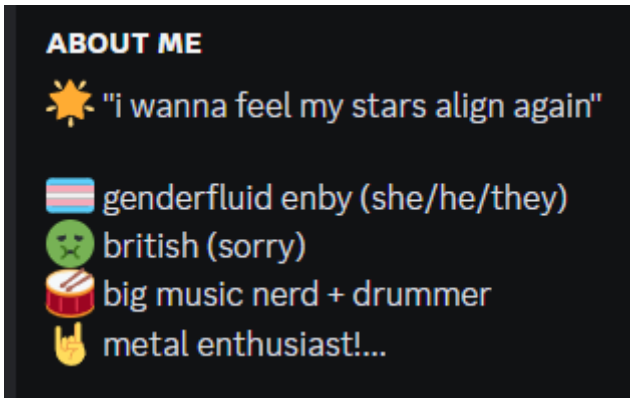


Figure 5.15: A screenshot showing the 'About Me' card on Lyra's Discord profile

A contrasting example comes from the following extract (Extract 5.4) in which Lyra discusses her use of a particular meme in the 'about me' section of her Discord profile (Figure 5.15) and how it functions as a marker of her gamer identity when interacting with others in gaming-based Discord servers ('looking for group posts' refers to posts seeking teammates in multiplayer online games). Although Lyra's construction of a gamer identity is not specifically tied to her construction of a transgender identity, it is important to consider that online gaming contexts are often particularly hostile to female and queer gamers who stray from the normative 'white male gamer' model. This is something that Lyra had reported being concerned about when engaging with these online communities, sharing second-hand stories of friends' negative experiences and stating that she considered herself 'lucky' to have avoided any significant incidents of transphobic harassment when using Discord to find teammates. For this reason, Lyra's transfeminine identity is relevant to these interactions due to its marked status. As a marginalised member of these communities, Lyra's ability to align herself with a gamer identity in other ways is particularly important in order to position herself as sufficiently similar to others in the community to achieve the shared goal of friendly team-based gaming.

Extract 5.11

1	**Gabe**	one I wanted to ask you about specifically (.) I noticed when I was
2		speaking to you on Discord
3	**Lyra**	oh [god here we go]
4	**Gabe**	[in your Discord] about me?
5	**Lyra**	yeah?
6	**Gabe**	you have puke emoji and then British (.) open brackets) (.) sorry (.) [close

7		brackets]
8	**Lyra**	[@@@] u::m (.) I guess it's a bit online about how (.) British people a::re
9		(.) y'know (.) aren't human (.) [and filthy and] gross
10	**Gabe**	[@@@]
11	**Lyra**	not because people actually <u>hate</u> them (.) but I mean (.) I don't know
12		where the joke <u>came</u> from but as someone who is British I find it really
13		funny
14	**Gabe**	mm
15	**Lyra**	I love the memes about it <u>so</u> much (.) of course no one actually like (.) it's
16		like (.) [yeah]
17	**Gabe**	[sorry] for being British? <covers face in mock shame> @@
18	**Lyra**	exactly exactly it's like that yeah (.) <u>of course</u> no one actually hates people
19		because they're British it's not like <u>that</u> (.) but (.) it's (.) I don't- I don't know
20		<u>why</u> it's Britain got picked for that meme actually to be fair I don't know
21		<u>how</u> it came to us (.) [but]
22	**Gabe**	[mm]
23	**Lyra**	I- no one I <u>know</u> (.) like hates them? (.) everyone I know finds them so
24		funny it's un[real]
25	**Gabe**	[yeah]
26	**Lyra**	I've had people ask me and like- in like looking for group posts like in voice
27		chat like are you British like ye::ah sorry
28	**Gabe**	@@
29	**Lyra**	like you should be sorry you're filthy I was like I kno::w @@ (.) so I- I find
30		it really funny that-s that's it really I'm not like I'm- I'm <u>not</u> like disgusted to
31		be English
32	**Gabe**	yeah @@
33	**Lyra**	I just find it funny- the jokes funny (.) that's it

Throughout this extract, Lyra repeatedly states her lack of knowledge about the meme's origin or its reasons for positioning British people as subhuman or sickening. Though this could be perceived as a threat to her membership in this particular online subcultural community, Lyra counters this by foregrounding her enjoyment of the meme and her ability to perform British identity appropriately to take part in the joke. Lyra refers to the meme as 'a bit online' (line 8), with the term 'a bit' here referring to a recognisable set of deliberately performed actions, often used colloquially online to indicate that someone is behaving in an ironic way for the purposes of humour or entertainment. Lyra emphasises the ironic nature of the meme's anti-British stance, clarifying '<u>of course</u> no one actually hates people because they're British' (lines 18-19) and 'I'm <u>not</u> like disgusted to be English' (lines 30-31), with her emphasis on '<u>of course</u>' suggesting that to hold such an opinion earnestly would be absurd. However, Lyra has nevertheless chosen to include this ironic stance in her 'about me' among other information about herself, such as her gender identity, pronouns, and interests, suggesting that it communicates additional identity information beyond merely where she lives.

The relevance of this meme is expanded upon later in the extract. In lines 26 to 29, Lyra uses constructed dialogue to simulate typical interactions she experienced responding to 'looking for group' posts on Discord, illustrating how the nebulous 'British people are gross' meme can serve as the foundation for a ritualised interactional script. To consider again the dimensions outlined by Shifman (2013), Lyra's lack of contextual knowledge about the meme itself does not prevent her from embracing the meme's humorous anti-British ideology, and engaging with how the meme has been integrated into group social practice through these script-like interactions serves to authenticate her gamer identity. This is an example of the tactic of adequation, with Lyra backgrounding the aspects of her identity that would mark her as outside of the norm of gamer identity and instead foregrounding shared knowledge and values using the 'British is bad' meme.

This analysis reveals how these two participants positioned themselves as particular types of transgender people by indexing membership to other online imagined communities of practice. While Ash foregrounds their queer identity and authenticates their identity as a 'queer Sherlock fan' through indexing both shared knowledge and the appropriate shared affective stance towards the show, Lyra highlights how her knowledge of memes popular in online gaming communities allows her to construct a shared 'gamer' identity and facilitate positive, cooperative social interaction despite her anxieties about participating in such male-dominated spaces as a queer feminine person. This reveals the nuanced ways that my participants engage with memes to authenticate their identities among different communities, as well as construct similarity and difference while navigating the overlap between multiple salient identity positions in specific social media contexts.

5.3.4 'Covert' trans memes

The final example in this section concern's my participant Blåhaj's relationship with a particular meme among trans (and particularly transfeminine) social media users, and which inspired her choice of pseudonym: Blåhaj[3], a shark soft toy created by the IKEA company. This meme plays a complex and nuanced role in Blåhaj's construction of transfeminine identity, simultaneously inconspicuous enough to not out her as transgender to a broad audience but able to index her membership to a specific online transfeminine subculture. In this way, the Blåhaj shark meme functions as a kind of 'secret code' recognisable only to other queer people (Leap, 2023), allowing Blåhaj herself to maintain plausible deniability while constructing a transgender identity legible only to those in her in-group.

Extract 5.5 comes from a personal message sent to me by Blåhaj, who requested that she be forewarned of upcoming interview questions to mitigate anxiety around being interviewed and chose to provide some answers in writing. In this case, Blåhaj chose to share the following message in response to learning that I intended to discuss posts she had retweeted featuring the Blåhaj shark, especially since she had already chosen the toy's name as her pseudonym. Blåhaj explained that the toy shark was significant because of its memetic status among transfeminine people online as a symbol of the 'boymoder' identity in which Blåhaj found comfort. In the following extract, Blåhaj describes what boymoder identity represents and how she feels the identity was co-constructed among online transfeminine communities:

[3] I will be referring the soft toy as 'the Blåhaj shark' to avoid confusion.

Extract 5.12

Blåhaj I always thought of the 'boymoder' as a concept and how they are portrayed online in comics and vibes as sort of a counter to the idea that all trans women are masculine in a weird way. It sort of takes the idea of the trans woman who does not want to girlmode for whatever reason (IRL usually because she feels too masculine and society would be weird if she expressed in a more feminine way) and throws the concept on its head. Instead of actually being masculine and looking 'conventionally weird' for a woman, she actually looks objectively feminine to most and just doesn't want to girlmode because of body dysmorphia. Now I think this idea appeals to us because it goes directly against the idea that we are all masc freaks as the transphobes want us to believe, its a concept created to counter societal vibes about us and at the very least make us feel better? And the word itself has definitely evolved since a few years ago, it didn't hold all these connotations and ideas before. It literally just used to mean 'a trans woman who presents as a guy for whatever reason'.

Even prior to providing a definition of 'boymoder', Blåhaj highlights in lines 1-3 how she feels the boymoder concept provides a counter to transphobic rhetoric, foregrounding how aligning herself with the values represented by the boymoder works to construct a resistant identity. Blåhaj's use of the adverb 'objectively' in her description of the boymoder as a trans woman who 'actually looks objectively feminine to most and just doesn't want to girlmode because of body dysmorphia' (lines 8-9) illustrates the power of gender norms. On the one hand, the term 'objectively' here foregrounds the unreliable nature of one's self-perception when suffering from body dysmorphia[4], a condition Blåhaj herself struggles with, by contrasting the boymoder's evaluation of her own appearance with an 'objective' evaluation unaffected by such cognitive distortion. However, the idea that one *can* look 'objectively feminine' reifies dominant gender norms as external truths outside of cultural or political influence. This is contrasted with how Blåhaj frames the boymoder's assumption that she would look 'conventionally weird' (line 7) if she were to adopt a feminine gender presentation. Blåhaj places this in quotation marks, visibly separating the idea from her own voice and viewpoint. Her use of 'conventionally', especially when compared to 'objectively', highlights the role of social norms and tradition in shaping this negative evaluation. In this way, Blåhaj foregrounds the cultural and ideological nature of gender norms when suggesting that a trans person's non-conforming gender presentation may be considered abnormal or socially unacceptable, delegitimising such negative judgments. This is backgrounded when characterising the boymoder as 'objectively feminine', authenticating her female identity (and, by extension, that of the trans women who identify with her) and further suggesting that her femininity is somehow undeniable despite her masculine gender

[4] Body dysmorphia, or body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), is a mental health condition characterised by intrusive worries about perceived flaws in one's appearance that are severe enough to impact an individual's daily life (*Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)*, 2021). Although 'body dysmorphia' is sometimes used colloquially to refer to any persistent appearance-based anxiety, Blahaj is referring here to clinically significant symptoms of BDD resulting in anxiety, depression, and difficulty leaving her home.

presentation. This apparent contradiction arises from Blåhaj's careful negotiation of gender norms to authenticate a hypothetical trans woman's identity while also undermining negative evaluations of gender non-conforming presentations, illustrating the complex relationship between this aspect of trans collective identity construction and dominant gendered ideals.

Beginning in line 9, Blåhaj's pronoun use aligns her with a broader imagined community of transfeminine social media users. Rather than framing her explanation as representative of her own individual feelings, Blåhaj explains 'I think this idea appeals to us because it goes directly against the idea that we are all masc freaks as the transphobes want us to believe' (lines 9-11). Her use of the first-person plural pronouns 'us' and 'we' positions her own experience as shared by everyone who identifies with the boymoder identity. This strengthens her construction of 'boymoder' as a resistant identity, responding not only to individual struggles with insecurity and gender dysphoria but also challenging dominant discourses ('societal vibes') that denaturalise transfeminine identity. Blåhaj's construction of an 'us vs. them' dichotomy between trans women who embrace the boymoder character and 'the transphobes' further reinforces this. In this way, Blåhaj positions identification with the boymoder as simultaneously recognising the individual struggles of transfeminine people with self-perception and confidence while rejecting the generalised transphobic characterisation of trans women as aberrant and inherently masculine ('masc freaks'). In doing so, Blåhaj constructs the boymoder as a shared identity that contextualises her own struggles within a greater community struggle, foregrounding the recent and collective construction of boymoder as a resistant identity ('the word itself has definitely evolved since a few years ago', l. 13) to further highlight this ideological stance.

This extract illustrates how social media-based communities can play an important role in the collective construction of new identity positions. In the case of the boymoder, comics and memes posted to social media featuring the Blåhaj shark alongside this character recontextualised the stuffed toy as an index of a resistant transfeminine identity. For Blåhaj, the contextual knowledge required to interpret its significance meant that she was able to share posts featuring it to her public Twitter account in a way that did not expose her transgender identity to outsiders. For posts such as Figure 5.16, one can infer from Blåhaj's description that the 'mentally ill girl' may well be interpreted as 'boymoder with body dysmorphia' by others in her community. However, for the majority of her Twitter audience, the meme can be read as simply expressing appreciation for a popular product and the comfort it can provide to mentally ill people.



Figure 5.16: A meme retweeted by Blåhaj, showing a cartoon girl in alternative clothing ('mentally ill girl') holding a blue shark plushie ('blåhaj she's emotionally dependent on')

This example highlights another way in which memes can factor into the sophisticated identity work of my participants as they manage their visibility and navigate a desire for both connection and safety when interacting online. In this example, Blåhaj positions her experience of participating in online transgender communities and collectively negotiating recognisable ways of being transgender and transfeminine as a positive and affirming experience. Though her positive experience with online transgender communities aligned with the majority of my participants' reported experiences, there were also times when participants reported feeling constrained by the norms and expectations of others within particular online (imagined) communities of practice, as I will explore in the following section.

5.4 Challenges and Constraints

This chapter has explored a variety of ways that social media affordances have facilitated individual and collective identity construction among my participants, reflecting the generally positive stance my participants took towards social media as a technology for self-expression and social connection. However, these positive experiences were not universal. In this final section, I will consider how my participants position their identity construction as constrained by normative expectations brought about by both the multimodal nature of social media platforms and the collective identities constructed within online transgender communities.

5.4.1 Intra-community Conflict

The threat of conflict caused by potential queerphobic audience members was highlighted by all of my participants, and several chose to only disclose their transgender identity on private social media accounts to mitigate this risk. However, these precautions often failed to protect participants against unexpected negative experiences that occured in perceived safe spaces. A number of participants reported feeling othered by perceived norms emerging around queer and trans identity on social media, often referred to as the 'imagined centre' of a given imagined community (Blommaert, 2007; Winer, 2022). These normative ideals were experienced by participants as distinct from more dominant cis- and transnormative norms, and often as restricted to a specific social setting or social media platform.

For one participant, Bee, the decision to remain closeted caused particular difficulty in conforming to community norms of trans identity construction, which had resulted in their removal from two different Facebook groups that advertised themselves as 'trans-inclusionary' following accusations of inauthenticity regarding their trans identity. During their initial interview, Bee talked about the difficulties they experienced identifying as nonbinary while involved in a number of male-dominated communities, such as those dedicated to tabletop role-playing gaming and wargames such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Warhammer 40,000*. In some cases, this had escalated to homophobic comments, conflict, and ultimately being forced to leave, which motivated Bee to seek community in 'queer only' Facebook groups. However, Bee felt that only a subset of transgender identities and expressions were authorised in these groups, leading to illegitimation of their own identity as a nonbinary person as they recount in the following extract:

Extract 5.13

1	**Bee**	I've also found that (1.0) it's been- it's been a tough adjustment to:: (.) um::
2		(.) trans inclusionary spaces as well?
3	**Gabe**	really?
4	**Bee**	erm:: yeah (.) not in the sense of I didn't like want to be there or anything
5		like that but I (.) y'know (.) when these issues in the predominantly straight
6		male spaces started to arise?
7	**Gabe**	yeah?
8	**Bee**	I started to seek out y'know trans-inclusionary spaces and that kind of
9		thing (.) thinking that this would be a safer place where I can be myself
10		and not have to worry about (.) y'kno::w (.) how much of myself I give
11		away?
12	**Gabe**	yeah
13	**Bee**	only to find out there was (.) a whole other set of rules (.) I once got told
14		that I wasn't trans enough to speak on a matter? (.) erm:: because I'm
15		nonbinary and I'm not out so (.) er::
16	**Gabe**	mhm
17	**Bee**	that was a whole thing (1.0) erm:: (.) I got kicked out of a queer craft
18		group as well?
19	**Gabe**	oof

Bee because I got into a disagreement with someone and the::y said- they basically said that I was erm (.) a straight man pretending (.) to cause to cause arguments?

[…]

Bee I got accused of mansplaining and then I said that I'm not a man and then they were like no (.) you're a straight man pretending just to cause arguments and then I got kicked

Gabe oh no

Bee which was horrific (.) and did not do well for (.) er::: (.) my mental health because (.) I joined that group because I got kicked out of my previous craft group because I was trans

Gabe o::h no

Bee it's li::ke (.) it was like I was out of the frying pan and into the fire @@@ I was like well okay (.) there isn't very much I could do about this

Gabe so do you think there's pressure to be like a certain kind of trans person in some trans spaces?

Bee oh absolutely (.) absolutely (.) to the point where in a lot of (.) trans spaces (.) even though I feel much safer there (.) that I often won't post or um (.) or won't comment on stuff (.) especially if my picture's attached to it because then people see my picture (.) think straight man then (1.0) yeah It just opens the door for nastiness in what's supposed to be a safe space for me?

In this extract, Bee highlights two experiences within private 'queer only' Facebook groups that were explicitly presented as trans-inclusionary. As private groups require new members to be approved by group admins, participation in such groups implies that one's queer identity has been verified in some capacity, though Bee positions this acceptance as conditional and revokable. In this narrative, Bee's transgender identity is positioned as illegitimate by both group members, who initially challenged the validity of their transgender identity, and group admins, who ultimately banned them from the group following these disputes. The multimodal nature of social media construction is also made relevant in Bee's emphasis on the role of their profile picture in prompting negative evaluations from other transgender people.

In the initial, shorter narrative that takes place between lines 13 and 15, Bee describes having their identity positioned as illegitimate when attempting to participate in a discussion presumably related to transgender identity or experience. Bee frames this as 'I got told that I wasn't trans enough … because I'm nonbinary and I'm not out' (lines 13-15), positioning both being nonbinary and being closeted as violating the accepted construction of transgender identity within the group. The phrase 'trans enough' further positions transness as a gradable scale, where one may be somewhat trans but still fail to meet a specified requirement for participation in given communities or activities, or to be recognised as authentically trans. In their account, Bee emphasised the phrase 'trans enough' and did so with an incredulous, exaggerated intonation, communicating a dismissive stance towards the argument. However, the idea that a trans person might be made to feel that they are not

‘trans enough’ also appeared frequently in my discussions with another nonbinary participant, Ash, and has been documented in previous research on transgender people’s experiences of denaturalisation from both external and intracommunity discourses (Catalano, 2015), particularly among nonbinary people (Konnelly, 2022). The frequency of the phrase ‘trans enough’ in both prior research and my own data suggests that the transmedicalist ideology propagated by medical and legal institutions has a widespread and significant role in shaping norms even among transgender people. This informs the ‘whole other set of rules’ (line 13) Bee positions as constraining their construction of an authentic trans identity within trans inclusionary groups as someone who has not been able to make permanent or public changes to their self-presentation due to being closeted in their work and family life. This is reinforced by Bee’s use of the metaphorical expression ‘out of the frying pan and into the fire’ (line 31) to adequate their experience in both implicitly trans exclusionary and implicitly trans inclusionary groups, positioning both as equally unwelcoming due to community norms that do not recognise or value diverse transgender identities.

Notable also in Bee’s account is the opposition constructed between queer and/or trans people and straight men specifically. Bee typically describes the previous hobby groups they participated in as ‘straight male’, positioning them as governed by norms of both masculinity and heteronormativity, which is contrasted with their expectations for queer- and trans-inclusionary groups. However, Bee repeatedly invokes the identity category of ‘straight man’ in both their conflict narrative and their description of how they expect others to interpret their profile photo, foregrounding their perceived heterosexuality in these interactions despite the fact that such an identity does not appear to be inherently in conflict with these groups’ norms - it is very possible that such groups include straight transgender men, for example. However, in Bee’s usage, ‘straight man’ seems less intended to index heterosexuality specifically, rather a stereotypical construction of cisgender masculinity in which ‘straight’ works to index patriarchal power and a hegemonic form of masculinity that is hostile to trans people, contrasting with a marginalised transgender identity. Bee’s claim that others in the group perceived them as ‘a straight man pretending just to cause arguments’ (lines 21-22) implies that others attributed explicitly harmful intentions to them based on their perceived identity as a ‘straight man’. The emphasis on ‘pretending’ foregrounds the denaturalisation of Bee’s transgender identity, positioning them as deceitful, while the adverb ‘just’ disqualifies any alternative motivations for participating in the group beyond inciting conflict. Taken together, this suggests that the figure of the ‘straight man’ serves to index an oppressor identity, justifying Bee’s removal from the group as a removal of a threat to its marginalised group members.

In Bee’s retelling, their perceived social power within a ‘safe space’ for those with particular marginalised identities leaves them, somewhat ironically, feeling disempowered and constrained. In line 32, Bee quotes their reaction to their removal from the group as ‘well okay (.) there wasn’t very much I could do about this,’ positioning themself as lacking agency. This is further intensified in Bee’s statement that ‘people see my picture (.) [and] think straight man’ (line 38), framing this misattribution of identity as an inevitable result of others’ seeing their profile photo. For Bee, the normative expectation that social media profiles include a profile photo showing the user’s likeness is taken for granted as a requirement, but one that constraints their queer identity construction to the extent that they feel unable to actively participate in queer groups for fear of negative consequences due to their need to remain closeted. Bee positions themself as passive and powerless to express

their transgender identity without experiencing social rejection, unable to participate safely in groups that are not explicitly trans-friendly but limited to passive observation in trans-inclusionary groups. In this way, Bee's closeted nonbinary identity positions them between two conflicting identity categories, their authentic nonbinary identity and the normative masculine identity they must perform to avoid offline discrimination. On a social media platform that only allows for self-representation using a single consistent name and profile image across all areas of the site, the need to obscure their transgender identity to remain safe precludes active engagement in social contexts intended to be affirming and supportive.

5.4.2 Platform-specific Normative Constraints

Like Bee's narrative in the previous section, both Colin and Ash spoke about experiencing pressure to conform to restrictive norms within online trans communities, leading to a similar withdrawal of participation. In their case, however, these norms were not explicitly communicated or negotiated in interactions but rather inferred through participating and observing others within a particular online context. In the following two extracts, Colin and Ash both speak of their experiences of different models of acceptable transgender identity on TikTok, leading ultimately to their decision to stop sharing original videos to the platform:

Extract 5.14

1	**Colin**	y'know if I just (.) turned on my camera filmed a joke or filmed a video (.) it
2		would then be hit with a <u>lot</u> of scrutiny and a lot more sort of y'know (.)
3		maybe comments about my appearance maybe comments about my voice
4		maybe like y'know it- (.) I wish there was just y'know (.) I wish I could just
5		be some guy
6	**Gabe**	mm yeah
7	**Colin**	@@@ [y'know?]
8	**Gabe**	[@@] yeah
9	**Colin**	erm y'know I wish that it didn't have to be like that y'know there's <u>boxes</u>
10		that trans people and particularly transmascs have to fall into which is that
11		like overwhelmingly (.) <u>overwhelmingly</u> y'know (.) white (.) skinny (.) like (.)
12		<u>fashionable</u> uh dresses in- in certain <u>subcultures</u>
13	**Gabe**	mm [yeah]
14	**Colin**	[y'know] looks a certain way very very sort of erm (.) there are <u>boxes</u> of
15		transmasculine that you can be in and- but <u>all</u> of them require a level of
16		like attention and effort and (.) like (1.0) I don't know (.) and also I- I- I'm
17		talking specifically about TikTok

In Extract 5.7, taken from my first interview with Colin, he discusses how he felt his more normative masculine gender presentation fell outside of the '<u>boxes</u> of transmasculine that you can be in' (lines 14-15), preventing him from filming videos without investing a degree of time and effort to achieve a more acceptable transmasculine presentation. Colin's statement of 'I wish I could be just some guy' (lines 4-5) works to foreground the unremarkable nature of his gender presentation in other contexts. This is achieved through his use of the minimiser 'just' and the nonspecific determiner 'some' to suggest that there is nothing to set him apart from other men. The more informal identity label of 'guy' also contributes to Colin's

construction of his own masculine gender presentation as casual and low-maintenance, which he positions as problematic within the specific normative expectations to which he feels transgender TikTok creators are held. According to transnormative ideology, achieving a gender presentation that aligns sufficiently with dominant masculine norms as to render a trans person's gender presentation unmarked in this way is often positioned as evidence of a 'successful' transition, though Colin positions this style of presentation as unacceptable to his imagined TikTok audience and inviting scrutiny and denaturalisation from others. His use and emphasis of the word 'boxes' in lines 9 and 14 to describe acceptable models of transmasculine identity figuratively positions these normative constraints as physical, emphasising their rigidity and limiting nature.

Colin constructs an alternative set of norms for transmasculine identity on TikTok, drawing on dominant norms of bodily attractiveness (e.g. thinness, whiteness) but also incorporating alternative fashions and ways of styling oneself to align with 'certain subcultures' (line 12). He denaturalises these identities through emphasising that 'all of them require a level of like attention and effort' (lines 15-16), suggesting that there is no way to construct acceptable transmasculine identity on TikTok without conscious labour. This is contrasted with his own masculine presentation, which he positions as natural and therefore authentic when he suggests he would merely need to '[turn] on [his] camera' (line 1) to capture it. This is mirrored in a discussion I had with Ash (Extract 5.8) where they describe their construction of a 'persona' in their TikTok videos (line 5) and position this as a necessary prerequisite for to making a video that would 'get views' (line 7):

Extract 5.15

1	**Ash**	when I used to use TikTok more 'cause I don't really use it- I don't post
2		videos on there anymore
3	**Gabe**	yeah?
4	**Ash**	I went through a phase during the (.) pandemic where I was posting videos
5		(.) and that was definitely a persona on there?
6	**Gabe**	[yeah]
7	**Ash**	[of a] cute nonbinary person? (.) because I wanted to get views @@

Although Ash does identify as nonbinary and often dresses in alternative fashion that incorporates 'cute' elements such as pastel colours, their performance as a 'cute nonbinary person' (line 7) is nevertheless positioned as inauthentic, suggesting that Ash felt they were conforming to a specific model of 'cute nonbinary person' that required foregrounding or exaggerating these traits beyond their typical identity construction in order to find success on the platform.

In both cases, Colin and Ash's constructions of a normative transmasculine and nonbinary identity on TikTok do not align with dominant constructions that emphasise passing as cisgender or achieving androgyny. Instead, these participants construct specific styles of self-presentation that are likely influenced by the highly visual nature of the video-only TikTok app, which puts greater focus on the visual aspects of individual's identity construction. Further, TikTok has become notorious for influencing fashion trends and popularising highly specific, curated alternative fashion trends known by its users as 'aesthetics'; this reflects the emphasis placed on aesthetic values, and likely also informs Colin and Ash's perception of

acceptable TikTok identity construction as closely tied to alternative fashions and subcultures. This visual focus is highlighted in Colin's opening narrative in Extract 5.7 in which he says 'if I just (.) turned on my camera filmed a joke … it would then be hit with a lot of scrutiny' (lines 1-2), suggesting that if he attempted to express himself in a way that emphasised an alternative aspect of his identity, such as his sense of humour, it would be received negatively by others users who would nevertheless focus on his appearance and voice. The unfeasibility of this is further reinforced by his use of the verb 'hit' and his emphasis on 'lot' to position this anticipated negative response as violent and extensive. For Colin and Ash, TikTok's focus on visuality rewards conformity to normative identity positions based upon visual signifiers, whether that be alternative fashion subcultures or more generalised 'cute' motifs in clothing, makeup, and body language, that these participants position as incompatible with authentic identity construction.

The fact that these normative identity positions for transmasculine and nonbinary people do not align with dominant transnormative constructions demonstrate how even the norms that emerge within counterpublics can be experienced as restrictive for participants. In Colin's case, he places particular emphasis on how these alternative norms reproduce aspects of dominant discourses through an emphasis on being thin, white, and expressing oneself through consumption practices. Further, the fact that both of these participants position TikTok as uniquely constraining in a similar way illustrates how the affordances of a social media platform can shape the social norms that emerge among its users, this time in a way that my participants experienced as restrictive and ultimately made the platform unsuitable for their needs.

In concluding this section, I wish to emphasise again that my participants overwhelmingly positioned participation in an imagined community of transgender people as positive and empowering, and extended those evaluations to social media as a means through which they could connect with others who shared their transgender identity. However, it is important to recognise that 'the transgender community' and 'the queer community', as imagined communities, cannot be understood as a single hegemonic group (Barrett, 1997). Rather, they are collective identities built on ideas of shared experiences, largely in response to prejudice and discrimination, and are co-constructed not only on the level of broad cultural discourses, but also within specific interactions, including my own interactions with participants. Often, my participants foregrounded positive experiences of resistance and empowerment in their construction of 'the trans/queer community', highlighting shared experiences of overcoming alienation and community events such as Pride. At other times, such as in the examples from my conversations with Bee, Colin, and Ash, more negative aspects may be most salient in a specific interactional moment. This does not mean that these participants found interaction or identification with these imagined communities to be broadly negative, nor does it reflect their positioning throughout the hours of conversation I shared with them. Rather, I choose to highlight these interactions to explore the complexity of how my participants draw on imagined communities as a resource in their construction of a queer and trans identity in a variety of ways, and to highlight that normative discourses constrain trans people's identity construction regardless of intention or origin.

5.5 Conclusion

My analysis in this chapter revealed how my participants' online identity construction was shaped by both the technical and social affordances of the different online social contexts they occupy. Participants make use of indexical features that are meaningful specifically in

these online contexts but which would otherwise be impossible or unintelligible in other situations, positioning themselves in relation to identity types that are salient in these online spaces using codified visual symbols, memes, and constructed shared experiences based primarily on online interactions. This is particularly true of online counterpublics, with alternative online norms allowing for the construction of positive transgender identity construction that resists both cisheteronormative and transnormative ideology by positioning transgender individuals as desirable and agentive, and by affirming the authenticity of transgender individual's gender self-identification.

However, as my analysis revealed in the latter part of this chapter, the alternative norms governing online counterpublics were not universally experienced as empowering. Notably, all of the participants who described feeling as though their identity construction was constrained in certain online transgender communities identified as nonbinary – an experience articulated by all but one of my nonbinary participants. This mirrors findings that suggest nonbinary people often struggle to negotiate normative expectations in ostensibly trans-friendly offline social contexts (Catalano, 2015; Barbee and Schrock, 2019), further challenging the idea that online social spaces necessarily offer greater possibilities for transgender identity construction. In the following chapter, I will explore the relationship between online and offline identity construction in greater detail, focusing specifically on the ways in which online and offline social contexts are often interrelated and how this can both enable and constrain participants' identity construction.

6 Agency and expertise at the online/offline interface

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I explore how my participants' online and offline identity constructions interact with one another, focusing specifically on their construction of agency. Working with both interview and social media data, I analyse how my participants' online identity construction is often a response to their offline experiences, either explicitly or implicitly, and reveal the complex ways in which my participants navigate the increasingly blurry boundaries between 'online' and 'offline'.

6.2 Constructions of Agency in Online vs. Offline Identity Construction

6.2.1 Technical Affordances

Although social media contexts offer a wide variety of different technical affordances for multimodal identity construction, several platforms still allow users to engage fully without any requirement to share their physical appearance. This is notable when compared to offline interaction where individuals share the same physical space and, ordinarily, cannot choose to obscure or significantly alter their appearance, voice, or other bodily characteristics over the course of everyday interaction. Several of my participants positioned the ability to be selective about *how* they engaged with various forms of multimodal self-representation on social media as especially important to them, reporting that it gave them a degree of control over their self-presentation (and gender presentation) beyond what was possible in face-to-face interaction. In the following extract, taken from my first interview with Blåhaj, she discusses how the ability to more effectively restrict other's ability to perceive her visually allowed her to adopt a more feminine gender presentation on social media when compared to in her offline life (for further context and related analysis, see Chapter 5.3.4).

Extract 6.16

1	**Blåhaj**	I guess I'm more comfortable posting more on social media than I would
2		be out in real life just because (.) I dunno um (.) on social media I can take
3		good pictures I can do the camera I can do angles and- and lighting and
4		everything is under my control?
5	**Gabe**	yeah
6	**Blåhaj**	and if it's not a good picture I just don't post it? (.) but if it <u>is</u> a good picture
7		then I have nothing to lose (.) but in real life like (.) like I have dysphoria
8		and dysmorphia and I don't think I look that great so I just try and tone it
9		down a little bit 'cause I don't want to be <u>cringe</u> (.) for all the cis people
10	**Gabe**	what do you mean by <u>cringe</u>?
11	**Blåhaj**	I don't want to look cringe I don't know (.) I guess I have some of- I have- I
12		have internalised transphobia I direct it at <u>myself</u> like I just (.) I don't want
13		to make my community (.) look bad I guess in a sense like I don't know
14		what's wrong with me I just have issues

Here, Blåhaj contrasts her social media identity construction with her offline identity construction, highlighting the affordances of social media photography and how they allow

her to overcome the constraints of her dysphoria and body dysmorphia. In describing how she presents herself visually on social media, Blåhaj foregrounds her sense of agency. Her repetition of 'I can' while describing the individual steps involved in taking selfies in lines 2-3 emphasises her capability, while her decision to conclude this list with 'everything is under my control' in line 4 explicitly positions her as independent and free from constraints imposed by others. This is reinforced by Blåhaj's statement in line 6 ('if it's not a good picture I just don't post it?') positioning the act of representing oneself visually on social media as entirely optional, allowing her to only present herself in ways she feels are 'good' and align with her self-image. The minimiser 'just' in line 6 emphasises the lack of consequences associated with unsuccessful attempts to achieve her desired visual presentation, while her assertion in line 7 that she has 'nothing to lose' in posting a good selfie further emphasises the 'low stakes' nature of sharing images of herself online in such a limited capacity. In contrast, Blåhaj highlights the constraints she experiences when making herself visible to others 'in real life' (line 7). Her use of the term 'real life' is not unusual for participants when referring to offline life, though here it serves to reinforce a separation between the artful, curated self-portraiture involved in Blåhaj's social media photo-sharing and the daunting task of navigating physical spaces as a visibly transgender person.

In lines 7-8, Blåhaj situates her experiences of anxiety and gender dysphoria focused on her physical appearance solely in the offline social realm when she says 'but in real life (.) like I have dysphoria and dysmorphia and don't think I look that great so I try to tone it down'. This is particularly striking as mental health conditions such as body dysmorphia are typically assumed to be consistent across contexts in everyday lay and medical constructions of identity, resulting from unchanging aspects of an individual's brain (Horwitz, 2002). Blåhaj challenges this view by positioning these experiences as contextual, stemming from the affordances of a given social context and the degree to which she can exert control over how and when her body is visible to others. This also challenges the narrow, medicalised construction of conditions such as gender dysphoria and body dysmorphia as purely psychological and separated from social life, as Blåhaj implicitly connects her experiences of dysphoria and dysmorphia as a salient and limiting factor in her identity construction to the higher stakes of 'real life' transphobia. This is further supported by the fact that the imagined gaze of a cisgender audience is more salient in Blåhaj's construction of her offline public persona, evidenced by her statement in line 9: 'I don't want to be <u>cringe</u> (.) for all the cis people'. This increased salience may be due in part to the fact that Blåhaj is not openly trans on social media - she had mentioned earlier in the interview that she had only shared photos where she 'looked arguably (.) cis-like? (.) enough that people won't question it' – though the idea that Blåhaj would be similarly stealth in offline social contexts is positioned as an impossibility through Blåhaj's construction of an 'us and them' separation between herself and 'all the cis people'. Her use of 'all' foregrounds her own minority status, while the preposition 'for' positions her physical appearance as something intended for consumption by a cisgender audience, further highlighting the constraints placed upon her by her experiences of vulnerability in offline social contexts.

Interestingly, elsewhere in the interview, Blåhaj clarifies that by 'tone it down', she is referring to her feminine gender presentation, particularly her use of makeup and normatively feminine clothing items and accessories, due to a fear of being perceived as 'hyperfeminine' as a trans woman and therefore not taken seriously. She went on to state that she would feel less able to engage with interests that are typically associated with femininity, such as 'fashion' and 'cute stuff that shows up on my Twitter' (Blåhaj frequently reposted images

featuring ‘cute’ characters, particularly Hello Kitty), if she were openly trans. This may initially appear unusual, since dominant transnormative ideology typically punishes trans women for *failing* to sufficiently conform to feminine norms. However, Blåhaj’s fear of looking ‘cringe’ instead reveals the complexity of embodying two marginalised identity positions simultaneously. The devaluation of feminine traits in patriarchal society often conflates normatively feminine interests, such as fashion and cuteness, with negative traits like vanity, frivolity, and childishness, which are positioned as shameful and embarrassing (‘cringe’). Here, Blåhaj’s assumption that she will be viewed as a representative for trans women as a population leaves her acutely aware of the conflict between her desire to be feminine and align with transnormative ideals and her fear of making other people ‘look bad’ if she is judged to be *excessively* feminine and therefore vain, frivolous, and airheaded. This reflects what is often referred to as the ‘double-bind’ experienced by women in patriarchal society (Lakoff, 1975; McElhinny, 2004), wherein women who do not conform to normative ideals of femininity are often rejected and ostracised, while the conformity of women who do is equally seen as proof of misogynistic stereotypes and used to justify their perceived inferiority. For trans women like Blåhaj, however, this is compounded by the intersection of trans identity and womanhood. While failure to conform sufficiently to cisheteronormative ideals may result in her trans identity being delegitimised and denied, trans women who construct normatively feminine identities often face denaturalisation via accusations that they are fetishising womanhood rather than authentically embodying it (Serano, 2020). In this way, the misogynist objectification and devaluation of women intersects with transphobia to intensify this ‘double bind’.

For Blåhaj, her statement ‘I have- I have internalised transphobia I direct it at myself’ (lines 11-12) reveals that she feels these constraints so intensely that she imposes them on herself despite recognising them as prejudiced and harmful. Her disfluency throughout this turn reveals her discomfort in expressing these feelings, taking a negative evaluative stance towards her own beliefs, describing them as ‘issues’ and suggesting there is something ‘wrong with [her]’ (line 14). Though she characterises her ‘internalised transphobia’ as problematic and unreasonable, she is articulating an experience shared by many marginalised people who must internalise and evaluate their identity construction according to the values and norms of those in power in order to minimise experiences of discrimination (Lemke, 2008; Pitcan, Marwick and boyd, 2018). In this extract, Blåhaj extends this to her ‘community’, cognisant not only of her individual identity performance, which may be evaluated by ‘the cis people’, but also how her choices may influence others’ perceptions of trans people as a whole. In this way, Blåhaj positions herself not only as a member of a larger imagined community of trans people but also a potential representative for them (Chib, Nguyen and Lin, 2021). This framing suggests that identifying with a broader imagined community of trans people can, at times, be experienced by Blåhaj as a responsibility that magnifies, rather than mitigates, the normalising impact of surveillance from dominant groups. Though she positions her beliefs as largely unreasonable through her labelling of them as ‘issues’, this emphasis on community membership allows her to regain some agency by framing these ‘issues’ as the result of her social responsibility, however excessive, and a desire for transgender liberation, rather than fear or individual vulnerability.

Blåhaj’s use and emphasis of the word ‘cringe’ is also notable given the term’s prevalence in online discourse. The term ‘cringe’ is used to reference the act of physically recoiling from something sufficiently awkward or embarrassing as to trigger feelings of visceral second-hand shame. On social media, the term is frequently (though not exclusively) used to target

individuals or behaviours associated with marginalised groups, such as transgender and neurodivergent people, and is often used in online right-wing rhetoric to ridicule the progressive idea that such groups should be accepted in society. The fact that this term appears in close proximity to the idea that Blåhaj may 'make [her] community (.) look bad' (line 13) reflects the often-political undertones of 'cringe' as a negotiation of social norms and a means to other and denigrate those who are seen to transgress them.

Ultimately, for Blåhaj, the fact that social media allows for asynchronous, selective engagement with the visual mode of identity construction gives her the felt sense that 'everything is under [her] control' (line 4), in contrast to the anxiety and unpredictability of physically interacting in offline public spaces. Blåhaj foregrounds her ability to restrict and review her own visual self-presentation as necessary to navigating her dysphoria and dysmorphia. This is reflected in her language use; in describing choosing photos to share online, she positions herself as capable of making judgements about whether a photo is good with a high level of certainty, contrasting her hypothetical evaluation of pictures as 'not a good picture' and 'it <u>is</u> a good picture' (line 6) with her uncertainty in 'I don't think I look that great' (line 8). In this way, Blåhaj positions herself as more able to make judgements about her own appearance and take action accordingly when using social media, whereas she describes an approach similar to the lowest common denominator approach when evaluating her offline self-presentation. This approach is connected to Blåhaj's sense of precarity in offline spaces as a transgender woman. Though she positions looking visibly trans as undesirable, this is explicitly associated with her construction of offline spaces as presenting greater potential harms to both herself and her community. For Blåhaj, then, the technical affordances of social media mitigate some of the pressure she experiences as a marginalised individual, with the ease of sharing one's photos on social media contrasted with the everyday vulnerability of existing as a transgender woman in her offline life.

6.2.2 Social affordances

Another participant, Ethan, produced a similar narrative, positioning social media as enabling authentic identity construction and directly contrasting this with his experiences of marginalisation in the offline social contexts he regularly frequents. In Ethan's case, however, it is not the technical affordances of social media – in this case Twitter – that are foregrounded, but rather his perception of the social affordances associated with his construction of Twitter's norms.

In the following two extracts, Ethan discusses a tweet he quoted (Figure 6.1) using a meme format that references a scene from the 2005 Dreamworks animated film *Madagascar* in which a penguin with a secret agent style persona emerges from a hole in the side of a shipping container and seeks the help of chimpanzee in a nearby cage by asking: 'You. Higher mammal. Can you read?'. This template for demanding information, accompanied by a still from the scene showing the penguin pointing outwards towards the viewer, was frequently repurposed to ask various questions and prompt discussion on Twitter (Know Your Meme 2022). In this example, 'higher mammal' has been replaced by 'TWITTER USER', and the penguin's demand is replaced with 'IS YOUR ONLINE PERSONALITY THE SAME AS YOUR IRL ONE??'. Ethan strongly denies this in his response, claiming that his personality IRL ('in real life') is 'absolutely not' the same as his online personality. His decision to respond using a quote tweet, as opposed to a reply, positions his response as intended for his followers more so than the original poster.



Figure 6.1: A screenshot of Ethan's tweet featuring the Madagascar meme, which Ethan has quote tweeted and added 'No absolutely not'.

In the first of the two extracts, Ethan foregrounds the context-dependent nature of identity construction. He is explicit in highlighting the fact that, although my perception of him in interviews may appear to me to reflect how he is 'just in everyday life', it is actually shaped by the specific context of our interviews and our relationship as researcher and participant. He differentiates this from how he constructs his day-to-day offline identity.

Extract 6.17

1	**Gabe**	what are you referring to here when you say like absolutely not
2	**Ethan**	I'm not as in like (1.0) god oh my god it's stupid but anyway (.) I'm not like (.)
3		it might seem like it to you but even like how I'm here like right no::w? (.) to
4		how I'm like just in everyday life I'm not like that
5	**Gabe**	this is also still kind of online I guess
6	**Ethan**	yeah exactly but even like (.) even in real life if I was with you (.) I'd be a lot
7		different than what I am in day to day
8	**Gabe**	mm?
9	**Ethan**	like I get obviously you're different around different people but (.) I'm not
10		like whatever the persona I've created on (.) my space online that is not
11		whatever the husk of me is (.) it's not the same person (.) well first of all I'm

12		very quiet in real life if that's even possible to believe @@ (.) I'm very quiet
13		(.) particularly at work (.) I don't really talk much at work I'm very quiet (.) and
14		(.) I'm not out (.) at all
15	**Gabe**	mm
16	**Ethan**	I get misgendered often (.) not often but like I'd say (.) about thirty percent of
17		the time? (.) a:::nd (.) I just ignore it? (.) and don't say anything? (.) I don't
18		even correct them I just (.) ignore it? (.) and let them go on with their day (.)
19		it's fine
20	**Gabe**	yeah?
21	**Ethan**	I would not do that on Twitter? (.) I'm not like that on Twitter? (.) I do not talk
22		(.) about any of my interests in real life to be honest with you

As the conversation continues, Ethan repeatedly foregrounds the ways in which his identity construction is constrained by various offline social contexts, positioning himself as very sensitive to these constraints and drawing connections between aspects of his identity construction in different contexts and the social pressures he seeks to respond to. Ethan clarifies his claim that his typical offline identity construction is 'a lot different' to what I have seen in interviews with 'like I get obviously you're different around different people' (line 9), using the generic pronoun 'you' to construct a universal experience of contextual variation in identity construction. His repeated use of the word 'different' emphasises that he does not believe identity is static, while the adverb 'obviously' positions this as self-evident, framing himself as well aware of the manner and degree to which variation in one's identity construction is part of a normative experience. Ethan then contrasts the extreme degree to which his 'day to day' offline and online identity construction diverge with this typical variation using the metaphor 'it's not the same person' (line 11). This framing suggests that his identity construction in online and offline contexts differ to such a degree that they are incompatible or contradictory, reinforced by his joking assertion that his description of how he behaves at work may be beyond what I find 'even possible to believe' (line 12). Here, Ethan specifically foregrounds the contrast between him being 'very quiet in real life' (lines 11-12) and the impression he felt I was likely to have of him owing to his talkativeness in interviews. This highlights the unusual social affordances of the interview context, particularly the fact he had been encouraged to talk freely about himself, and contrasts this with the offline contexts within which he typically interacts.

In describing his online and offline identities, Ethan refers to them as 'the persona [he's] created … online' (line 10) and 'whatever the husk of me is' (line 11). While the terms 'persona' and 'husk' both position these identities as somewhat inauthentic, Ethan's use of 'persona' foregrounds the conscious and partial nature of his online identity construction, suggesting that it represents a particular aspect of himself and is intended for a particular audience. In contrast, his use of metaphor to describe his offline identity as 'the husk of [him]' positions this version of himself as shallow and lifeless, merely an external shell devoid of substance. This metaphor is particularly evocative considering the dominant construction of an individual's identity in lay discourse as something that comes from within, positioning Ethan's offline identity performance as rather a performance of *non*-identity. In lines 12-22, Ethan highlights various aspects of identity that he does not express, such as when he says 'I'm not out (.) at all' (line 14) and 'I do not talk (.) about any of my interests in

real life' (lines 21-22). This aligns with his representation of his offline identity construction as a 'husk', with his use and vocal emphasis and extreme case formulations in 'at all' and 'any of my interests' pre-emptively countering other possible interpretations that would render his offline identity construction less marked (Pomerantz, 1986). This distinguishes Ethan's performance of non-identity from a more normative professional identity construction, where one might background certain aspects of their identity in favour of traits more relevant to their role in the workplace, and once again positions his offline identity construction as far outside of typical contextual variation. He contrasts this with his identity construction on Twitter, where he is outspoken about being transgender and dedicates a lot of time to engaging with fandom communities based around his interests in film and reality TV.

The primary contrast in Ethan's construction of his offline and online identity concerns issues of agency. Using the example of being misgendered at work in lines 16-19, Ethan foregrounds his lack of action when he says 'I just ignore it? (.) and I don't say anything? (.) I don't even correct them I just (.) ignore it?' (lines 17-18). Ethan's repetition of 'I just ignore it?' highlights the passive nature of his response, further reinforced by his use of the minimiser 'just'. Ethan adopts a more pronounced rising intonation throughout this description, suggesting an incredulous stance that positions his offline response to misgendering as so incongruent with his identity construction on Twitter and in interviews that it is almost unbelievable, even to him. His evaluative stance of 'it's fine' (line 19) is spoken with a falling intonation, suggesting apathy, positioning his gender identity as irrelevant to his workplace identity and less of a priority than his desire to 'let [the person who misgendered him] go about their day' (line 18) without causing disruption. This is placed in direct contrast to how he would respond on Twitter, with Ethan emphasising that he 'would not do that on Twitter' (line 21), where the data collected during his observation indicates that he often takes a strong stance on transgender issues and does not hesitate to take action to advocate for himself. This foregrounds the difference between his construction of his himself at work as passive, not speaking, not advocating for himself, and not engaging with his interests, and who he is online, someone who is enthusiastic and energetic, quick to advocate for himself and others, and passionate about his interests.

Ethan attributes this extreme contrast between his 'offline' and 'online' identity construction to a difference in social norms across contexts, particularly focusing on his perception of Twitter as an escape from the dominant social norms that constrain his offline identity construction. In Extract 6.3, taken from the same discussion prompted by Figure 6.1, Ethan elaborates on how he perceives social norms on Twitter to be different when compared to his experiences offline, specifically when it comes to his ability to construct an openly non-normative identity.

Extract 6.18

1	**Ethan**	I'm quite like judgemental of myself (.) and I think I'm not like that on Twitter
2		I'm a bit more like (.) there's more parts of my identity seen on Twitter
3	**Gabe**	so what do you think is like the reason (.) for that (.) for you?
4	**Ethan**	you can't get away with like- (.) I can't get away with (.) showing overtly
5		neurodivergent traits in public (.) I've been heavily ridiculed for that in the
6		past and I've like (.) heavily repressed a lot of it?
7	**Gabe**	yeah

8	**Ethan**	I feel like (.) I very much have a very constant awareness of (.) trying to act
9		like every single other person like (.) constantly (.) all the time
10	**Gabe**	mhm
11	**Ethan**	so:::: I think that's it? (.) whereas Twitter (.) every single person on that site
12		is in some form probably a bit (.) mentally ill @@@
13	**Gabe**	@@ everyone on Twitter?
14	**Ethan**	yeah if they're still on Twitter then (.) yeah just a bit (.) if you're still on Twitter
15		at like one AM at night then yeah @@ (.) but yeah I think (.) I just feel like it's
16		trying to integrate myself into society that's so difficult?
17	**Gabe**	mhm

In Extract 6.2, Ethan suggests that he feels more able to construct a non-normative identity on Twitter when compared to 'real life' when discussing how he responds to misgendering at work vs. on Twitter, which he elaborates on in Extract 6.3, linking this to his experiences as a neurodivergent person.

Ethan positions himself as lacking agency when he repeats that he 'can't get away with (.) showing overtly neurodivergent traits' (lines 4-5). The modal 'can't' positions the open expression of neurodivergence as either prohibited or impossible, while 'get away with' is typically used to describe avoiding consequences for actions deemed wrong. This reinforces Ethan's positioning of neurodivergent identity as unacceptable and illegitimate according to dominant norms, characterising his expression of neurodivergent traits as akin to a crime. In order to avoid negative social consequences, Ethan suggests that his neurodivergent identity has to be 'heavily repressed' (line 6). His repetition of 'heavily' in both 'heavily ridiculed' (line 5) and 'heavily repressed' (line 6) signals negative affect, drawing on the connotations of 'heavy' to characterise the stigma associated with his neurodivergent identity as burdensome and limiting. He further positions his more normative offline identity performance as the result of constant attention and work when he says 'I very much have a constant awareness of (.) trying to act like every single other person like (.) constantly (.) all the time' (lines 8-9), similarly repeating and emphasising that he must consider this 'constantly'. This conscious effort to monitor one's own behaviour and downplay stigmatised neurodivergent traits is known as 'masking,' a process similar to code-switching in which neurodivergent (particularly autistic) people study the behaviours of neurotypical others in interaction and adapt their behaviour in order to 'pass' as neurotypical themselves (Hall and Parish, 2024), requiring continuous attention and often leading to exhaustion and burnout. Ethan's repetition and emphasis of the 'constant' nature of this effort in conjunction with foregrounding his imitation of others denaturalises this performance of neurotypical identity, positioning it as a result of consistent, conscious effort and mimicry rather than an expression of his own individuality.

While conforming to neurotypical norms is positioned as essential for Ethan to navigate offline social contexts effectively, Ethan suggests that this is unlike his experience on Twitter where he is free to have 'more parts of [his] identity seen' (line 2). Rather than neurodivergence being marginalised, Ethan positions neuro*typical* identity as uncommon and unexpected among Twitter users when he says 'every single person on that site is in some form probably a bit (.) mentally ill @@@' (lines 11-12). While Ethan's laughter indicates a humorous stance and suggests that his use of 'mentally ill' is not necessarily

intended as a negative evaluation or even to suggest literal psychiatric illness or distress, it constructs a 'typical' Twitter user identity as one that falls outside of dominant neurotypical norms 'in some form'. To illustrate this, Ethan highlights an example of Twitter use that he positions as common but which also deviates from what might generally be considered norms of healthy behaviour, 'still being on Twitter at like one AM at night' (lines 14-15). Ethan's construction of typical Twitter user identity and behaviour is unlikely to reflect any kind of statistical average, but rather his own experience, online social network, and imagined audience on the platform. Instead, Ethan constructs an alternative set of social norms for the platform as it fits into his online social life and positions neurodivergent identity as affirmed within these alternative social norms, allowing him to construct a more authentic, 'overtly neurodivergent' identity when compared to his experiences offline. This echoes the contrast he draws between his construction of trans identity on Twitter vs. in his 'day to day' life in Extract 6.2, suggesting that Twitter's affirmation of non-normative identities also extends to transgender identity. When Ethan says that 'there's more parts of my identity seen on Twitter' (Extract 6.3: line 2), he positions Twitter as enabling the construction of a more diverse range of identities than the offline contexts he frequents, allowing him to feel 'seen' on Twitter in a way he does not in other social contexts.

Ethan's construction of these alternative social norms as universal is also reflected in the quote tweet (Figure 6.1) that initially prompted this discussion, in which he does not elaborate in any way on how his 'online personality' differs from how he is 'IRL'. Typically, significant differences between one's offline and online identity construction are evaluated negatively, associated with inauthenticity or negative behaviours such as 'catfishing' (see Chapter 2.6), and the admission that one's identity construction is drastically different online vs. offline is potentially face-threatening. However, Ethan's construction of Twitter as an alternative social context in which users are free to express socially marginalised aspects of their identities positions his own experience of feeling comparatively unconstrained in his identity construction as universal and therefore unmarked. Through this lens, Ethan's emphatic statement that his identity construction is 'absolutely not' the same aligns him with what he constructs as the normative experience for Twitter users, relying upon the shared assumption that Twitter provides an opportunity for self-expression which may not be embraced in offline contexts, such as a passion for niche interests or social justice, but which are positively evaluated according to Twitter's alternative social norms.

Ethan concludes his comparison between the constraints on his offline identity construction and his identity construction on Twitter with 'I just feel like it's trying to integrate myself into society that's so difficult?' (lines 15-16). Ethan's choice and emphasis of the word 'society' specifically connotes organisation, foregrounding the structures of power and the associated ideologies and norms that govern how people interact and which do not accommodate his transgender, neurodivergent identity. The marked nature of his identity is further reinforced by his use of the word 'integrate', characterising him as set apart from society despite having to live according to its norms. Ethan associates these norms with his experiences in offline social contexts, particularly the workplace, constraining his identity construction and requiring constant self-surveillance. Twitter, in contrast, is positioned outside of 'society' and implicitly contrasted with it as a social context in which Ethan feels able to 'integrate' without the same difficulty.

Similarly, Ethan's use of 'in public' to refer to offline social contexts in line 5 positions his identity performance on Twitter as comparatively private despite the fact that his account is

unrestricted and visible to anyone who may wish to view his profile, further characterising the social media platform as set apart from public life and society. This exclusion of Twitter from Ethan's construction of 'in public' may also be due in part to the greater degree of control Twitter offers its users in terms of which communities and users they choose to interact with. This likely informs Ethan's construction of Twitter as an alternative social context inhabited primarily by those whose identities fall outside of dominant norms, despite this not necessarily aligning with how other users might view the platform. Instead, 'public' connotes the exposure and scrutiny Ethan associates with his construction of 'society'. In this way, Ethan constructs Twitter as an alternative social context in which his identity construction is relatively unconstrained, allowing him to construct an authentic transgender and neurodivergent identity in a way that he does not feel empowered to do in his offline life, reclaiming his agency. I consider the link between social media and agency further in the following section.

6.3 Reclaiming Agency Across Contexts

In addition to using social media as an alternative social context through which to escape constraints placed upon their identity construction in offline contexts more generally, several of my participants also used social media as a space to respond to and recontextualise specific offline experiences, often in such a way as to reclaim agency. In the following two examples, two nonbinary participants, Ash and Bee, recount offline experiences in which their ability to construct a nonbinary identity was constrained in posts to their private Twitter accounts, demonstrating how these controlled accounts can be used to authenticate a nonbinary identity and reclaim agency in the face of adverse offline experiences.

In the first example, Figure 6.2, Ash initially tweets expressing their frustration and exhaustion with the challenges of performing a nonbinary identity in everyday life. This is followed by a second tweet providing context for their affective stance, in which they recount their efforts to have their nonbinary identity recognised and accepted by their colleagues. This narrative is introduced with the discourse marker 'like', positioning their experience at work as a representative example of a type of interaction they encounter regularly, and which inspires such an emotional response. This stance is reinforced by their use of punctuation, with their use of short, discrete sentences stylistically mirroring a list and emphasising the numerous ways they have worked specifically to make their nonbinary identity legible, only for this to be ignored. Similarly to Ethan in Extract 6.2, Ash positions their workplace identity construction as the result of extensive work and self-surveillance. However, by positioning these experiences as an essential part of being nonbinary, Ash frames them as an unavoidable consequence of their intrinsic identity and the failure of others to correctly interpret it. Importantly, Ash does not accept fault for others' failure to recognise their nonbinary identity; they instead rework this negative experience as evidence of their authenticity.



Figure 6.6: A two-tweet thread made on Ash's private Twitter account detailing their experience being misgendered by their colleagues.

By positioning their experiences as part of *being* nonbinary, Ash also stresses the essential nature of their gender identity, positioning it as something they unquestionably *are* rather than something they must achieve. This framing provides context for their second tweet, in which they recount actions they had taken prior to the event to make their identity known and obvious to their colleagues. As binary gender ideology does not offer a framework for constructing nonbinary identities, explicitly stating their identity and preference for specific pronouns and language is often the only way nonbinary people can reliably index their nonbinary gender identity (see discussion in Chapter 5.2.1), although Ash's use of the word 'reminder' here suggests that this is not the first time they have had to 'come out' to their colleagues. However, Ash goes on to recount several changes they made to their outward gender presentation, stating that: 'I wore a binder. I cut my hair. I had a masc outfit.' These actions, listed in the past tense, are framed as specific steps taken for the benefit of their colleagues, rather than examples of Ash's everyday nonbinary gender performance, positioning this more normatively masculine performance as constructed. This is also meaningful within the context of Ash's larger body of posts (see also: Chapter 4.3.2), particularly their interest in creating and sharing outfits that creatively combine normatively masculine and feminine fashion. However, through highlighting the steps they had taken to remove visual cues that index normative femininity – visible breasts, long hair, and feminine clothing – Ash articulates their effort to construct a 'non-woman' identity in the absence of

robust norms of nonbinary gender presentation. This ‘non-woman’ performance does not conflict with their nonbinary identity, but serves to position them as reasonable, accommodating and conscientious, having taken steps to also offer visual ‘reminder’s to their colleagues that they are not cisgender.

This practice of altering one’s identity performance to align with transnormative constructions is common among nonbinary people, who may deliberately and strategically obscure aspects of their gender identity that are fluid or otherwise do not align with binary norms of masculinity or femininity in order to perform an identity that will be recognised and accepted by others as transgender (Konnelly, 2021). By framing this practice as part of what it is to ‘be nonbinary’, Ash positions it as a shared experience among nonbinary people. In turn, this suggests that a need to strategically engage with binary norms to achieve their goals is part of what is ‘exhausting’ about being nonbinary, rather than something that could undermine their nonbinary identity. This is also reinforced by the structure of the list, presenting each visual change as a short, stand-alone sentence, creating a repetitive, additive effect. By exposing the labour involved in constructing a public-facing nonbinary identity, Ash positionss their private Twitter as a kind of ‘backstage’ social context (Goffman, 1986: see Chapter 4.3.4), where the expectation of shared understanding and solidarity among Ash’s limited queer audience allows for the denaturalisation of this transnormative performance

Despite this, Ash’s language choice in describing being misgendered at work highlights a lack of agency during the experience, referring to it as being ‘she/her’d and womanified’. The creative reworking of the pronouns ‘she/her’ into a verb and the term ‘womanified’ linguistically transform the experience of being misgendered into a process through which Ash *becomes* a woman, highlighting how their colleague’s refusal to recognise their nonbinary identity in social interaction effectively erases their identity and agency. Foregrounding the femininising nature of this misgendering using the pronouns ‘she/her’ and the social category of ‘woman’ further frames this misgendering as inappropriate and unjustified given their effort to conform to masculine norms. However, through listing the steps they have taken to inform and accommodate their colleagues, Ash positions their colleagues’ continued failure to gender them correctly as unwarranted and unreasonable, thus reclaiming their agency.

The second example, Figure 6.3, is taken from Bee’s private Twitter account. In this post, Bee responds in real time to feeling out-of-place arriving at a gaming convention due to a perceived lack of diversity. Unlike Ash’s struggle to have their nonbinary identity validated by others, Bee describes a situation in which they chose to remain closeted and affect a normatively masculine identity performance. Based on how Bee represented their experiences participating in male-dominated fandoms such as *Warhammer* in earlier discussions (see chapter 5.4.1), it is likely that this decision was motivated by the expectation that openly expressing their queer identity would limit their ability to safely and comfortably participate in convention activities. However, rather than framing this event as one in which their freedom to construct a nonbinary identity was constrained due to their vulnerability, Bee instead recontextualises the situation as a humorous anecdote in which

their agency is foregrounded and positions themself as authentically queer despite their closeted status.



Figure 6.3: A tweet on Bee's private Twitter account talking about Warhammerfest

In Bee's retelling of their arrival at Warhammerfest (a three-day event for fans of the *Warhammer* franchise), they highlight the apparent homogeneity of the convention's attendees by stating that the event 'really is just the white man convention.' Here, Bee is able to position themself as authentically transgender using the tactic of distinction to position themself as the 'odd one out' as a nonbinary person. Further, conventions are typically named in such a way as to communicate their intended audience (e.g. Warhammerfest is a festival that caters to Warhammer fans), suggesting that the event is not only popular among white men, but specifically *for* white men, in turn positioning Bee's nonbinary identity as unwelcome.

It is notable that Bee chooses to make race salient in constructing this distinction between themself and the other attendees. Bee is themself white, making whiteness a shared feature rather than a point of contrast. However, in this case, whiteness appears to be made salient *specifically* in conjunction with maleness, drawing on connotations of social power associated with both whiteness and maleness to index a specific kind of relationship to privilege and, by extension, a presumed lack of understanding or tolerance towards marginalised identities. Viewed this way, whiteness is constructed not a social identity shared by both Bee and the other convention attendees, but rather as a marker of ignorance and lack of shared experience of marginalisation. Bee's own whiteness is positioned as irrelevant by virtue of their intersecting queer and trans identities, allowing them to construct an identity as a 'good,' socially conscious white person (Konnelly, 2023) while also aligning themself with a broader construction of marginalised identity that is placed in opposition to a privileged other.

Given the very real threat of prejudice and violence faced by queer and trans people in everyday life, this construction of the other convention attendees as a unified group defined by their social power and perceived hostility towards Bee's marginalised identity could easily be interpreted as conveying fear or distress. However, Bee ends the sentence with an emoji

depicting a stylised yellow face crying with laughter (😂). This emoji facilitates Bee's affective stancetaking in the absence of face-to-face affective signals, such as tone of voice and facial expression, by suggesting a light-hearted, joking register. König (2019) found that this '😂' emoji was especially preferred for indicating a 'laughing with' stance, frequently used to position a disclosure as humorous, if perhaps a little awkward, ironic or embarrassing, and invite the audience to 'laugh with' a speaker. In this case, the humorous stance also supports Bee's construction of an authentic transgender identity, positioning their presence at 'the white man convention' as laughably absurd.

Positioning the situation as humorous rather than threatening also allows Bee to background their vulnerability as a trans person and instead position themselves as agentive, as supported by their construction of remaining closeted during the event as 'going undercover' – a term from the semantic field of law enforcement and covert operations. This framing foregrounds the strategic and goal-oriented nature of conforming to masculine norms in this situation, drawing on the connotations of skill and prestige associated with the work of a covert agent to position their male identity performance as an expert manipulation of the perceptions of others. Although this framing implies an element of risk associated with their presence in the space, likening it to a high-stakes infiltration allows Bee to gain agency and position themself as capable and in control, as well as undermining the power of the other convention attendees by positioning them as unwittingly falling for Bee's misdirection.

The 'going undercover' narrative also aids in Bee's construction of an authentic transgender identity by positioning their normative male identity as a disguise and recontextualising any misgendering they experience at the event as a result of their skilful performance, rather than as a failure to embody a nonbinary identity or advocate for themself. This denaturalisation of their normative identity performance is reinforced by their use of the term 'straightsona', a portmanteau of 'straight' and 'persona'. The suffix '-sona' is commonly used in fandom discourse to denote a character that is intended to represent a person in a particular way, popularised by the use of 'fursona' in the furry fandom to describe an anthropomorphic animal character that represents an individual – their 'furry persona'. In this case, the term 'straightsona' suggests that Bee is 'playing up' a character that is intended to represent themself if they were straight, though 'straight' here is seemingly used in a broader sense to refer to a lack of any kind of queer identity (including trans identity) rather than merely heterosexuality (see also Chapter 5.4.1). Similarly to Bee's earlier use of 'white male,' 'straight' here indexes a more generalised identity, foregrounding conformity to cisheteronormative expectations rather than any specific social identity category. This construction of the 'straightsona' simultaneously employs the tactics of distinction and denaturalisation, clearly highlighting the difference between Bee's 'straight' identity performance and their authentic self while explicitly positioning it as artificial by attributing it to a fictionalised performance.

Bee reinforces this separation between the straightsona and their authentic identity visually through their emoji use, ending the tweet with an emoji depicting a white man standing, seemingly acting as a visual representation of the 'straightsona'. The whiteness of the emoji is relevant here as it represents a deliberate choice on Bee's part, as emoji depicting more realistic humans still use a cartoonish yellow skin tone by default (matching the yellow tone of emoji such as the smiley face 😊) but allow users to customise this by choosing from a palette of more realistic skin tones. The emoji itself suggests no particular emotion or action,

indexing only the generic idea of normative white maleness, calling back to Bee's earlier description of the event as 'the white man convention.' Rather than indexing an affective stance, the emoji appears to visually represent this idea of normative masculinity, transferring these qualities to the 'straightsona' character. The neutral stance of the standing man reflects the ideological positioning of normative white masculinity as a neutral or default state, devoid of any marked characteristics, while also reinforcing Bee's goal of being unremarkable and blending into the crowd. However, by positioning this normative masculine identity performance as part of the character, Bee works to reconcile the potential conflict between their desire to construct an authentically queer identity and the identity work they must engage in to maintain their closeted status, positioning the latter as a wholly constructed 'straight persona' whose actions do not reflect their true self.

Like Ash, Bee's private Twitter also serves as a digital backstage (Goffman, 1986) where they may expose the constructed nature of their offline, public identity performance to a restricted group of trusted queer friends. In this example, Bee uses their private Twitter account as an alternative social context in which they can affirm their authentic nonbinary identity while still performing a closeted identity in their offline social context, constructing agency by positioning those that perceive them as male as falling for their deception and oblivious to their otherwise self-evident nonbinary identity. For both Ash and Bee, managing how their identity is perceived by others in order to achieve different social goals is positioned as a conscious and strategic process of selectively engaging with different norms and navigating the constraints placed on their ability to move through life as a nonbinary person by the expectations and ignorance of others. However, for both participants, the controlled online social context afforded by private Twitter accounts offers an alternative context in which dominant gender norms may be challenged and reworked, allowing them the reclaim their agency and position themselves as authentically and essentially nonbinary.

6.4 Expertise and Empowerment

While the previous examples in this chapter have focused on discrete situations in which online and offline contexts come together, the final section of this chapter considers more broadly how participants' online and offline social worlds mesh together in important ways. This was most salient for my participants in discussions around access to information about transgender and identity and gender-affirming care. Several participants positioned offline informational resources as inadequate and unsatisfactory, with Ash, Bee, Colin, Gregory, and Lyra all reporting that they initially learned about transgender identity through social media and relied upon social media to access the information necessary to accept and advocate for themselves as transgender people. In this section, I highlight how my participants develop and disseminate lay expertise online, investigating how two participants integrate social media-based communities and resources into their broader transition practices in response to insufficient information and support structures available to them offline.

While all of my participants spoke about the importance of using social media to access information and resources about transgender identities and transition, Gregory was by far the most involved in creating public-facing content about his experiences as a transgender man, which he shared on both his TikTok account and an Instagram account dedicated to documenting his transition. The following analysis will look in detail at Gregory's 'transition vlog' videos (see Chapter 5.2.3 for discussion of Gregory's transition posts more broadly). As a genre, transition vlogs work to construct, reinforce, and challenge norms and ideals

surrounding transgender experiences, desires, and bodies (Etengoff, 2019; Horak, 2014; Jones, 2019; Raun, 2015a). For Gregory, navigating these norms is complicated by the intersection between his transgender and disabled identity, and his transition vlogs strike a balance between constructing a disabled transgender identity through personal narratives and positioning himself as an educator offering generalisable advice to others who may be considering starting masculinising HRT.

As each video is around six minutes long, I focus my analysis primarily on the first two transition vlogs Gregory posted during the observation period: a Trans Day of Visibility (TDOV) video announcing that he had started testosterone (Figure 6.4), and his 2-month update vlog (Figure 6.5). These vlogs establish the format that his later updates go on to follow, with Gregory narrating new developments in how testosterone has impacted his body and his relationship to the social world. Often, Gregory also takes on an expert role to offer advice or information about masculinising HRT to his audience. In line with the discussion of 'hormone time' in the previous chapter (Horak, 2014: see discussion in 5.2.3), these videos were typically uploaded once a month on the anniversary of Gregory's first dose of testosterone and foreground changes that bring him closer to his desired masculine embodiment. The videos themselves are constructed in a formulaic fashion, with every video recorded using a webcam in his bedroom with Gregory sitting in a gaming chair (Figure 6.5), sometimes wearing headphones (Figure 6.4). This visual style conforms closely to the 'video diary' style of transition vlog (Raun, 2015b), creating a sense of intimacy with the viewer through visual proximity and inviting them into his personal space. The closer, chest-up composition of the shot also mimics the 'talking head' format often associated with commentary from authoritative experts in mainstream media genres like documentaries and televised news (Horak, 2014), visually reflecting the balance Gregory strikes between the personal and educational functions of his transition vlogs. Gregory's adoption of these conventional structural elements in narrating his own transition indexes familiarity with the norms for this style of transition video and aligns his experiences with those of other transgender vloggers, indexing membership to an imagined community of transgender social media creators and educators.

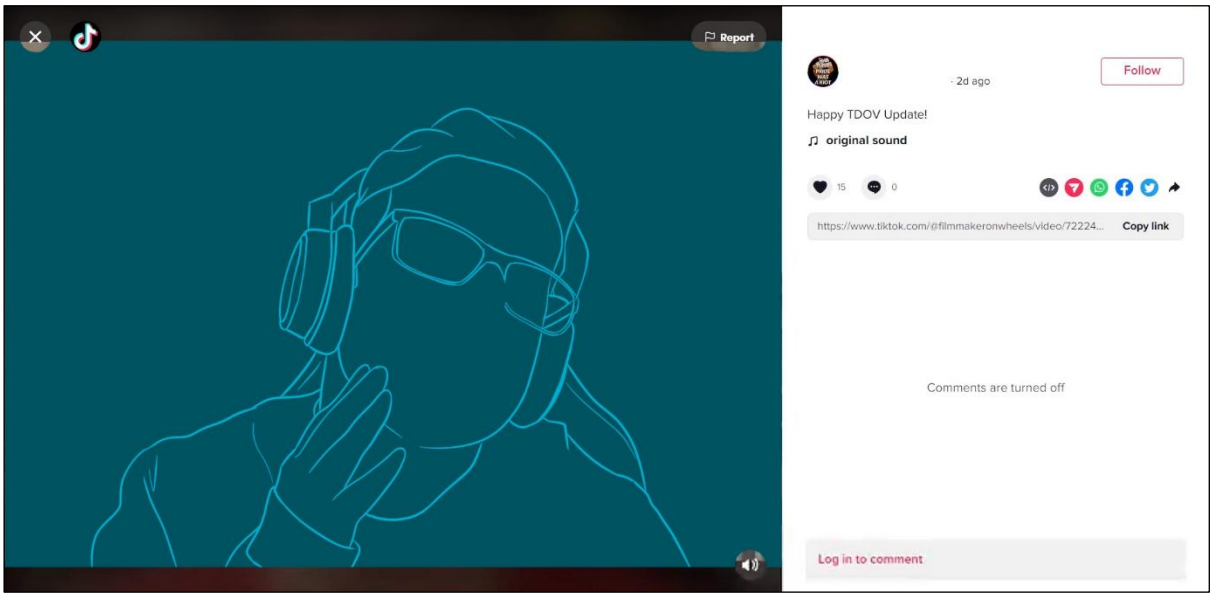


Figure 6.4: A screenshot of Gregory's TDOV vlog showing him running his fingers along his check and jawline as he describes changes in his skin texture

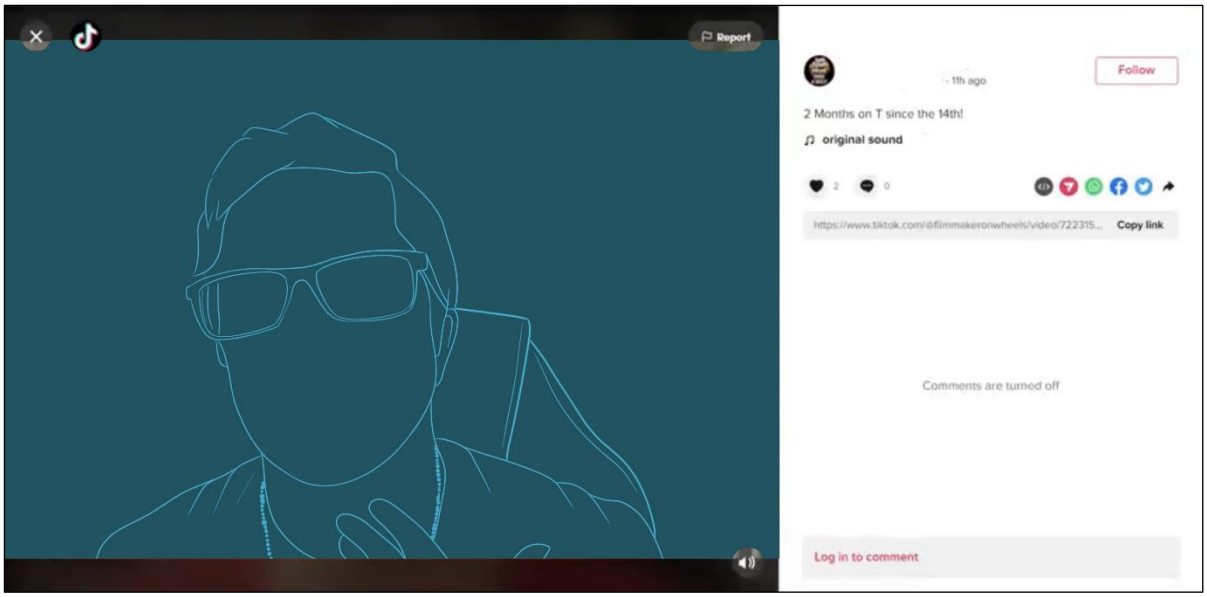


Figure 6.5: A screenshot from Gregory's '2 months on T' update vlog showing him touching his throat to indicate where one might feel discomfort associated with 'T cough'

Like many transition vloggers, Gregory moves between sharing personal narratives and taking on an expert role to inform and advise his viewers (Dame, 2013). This construction of expertise is most immediately recognisable in instances where Gregory contextualises his own experience with testosterone within a broader framework of what is possible for masculinising HRT, offering other possibilities that may be relevant to others. In the video where Gregory announces he has begun testosterone, he moves between narrating his personal experience of using testosterone gel and informing the viewer of other options for different formulations of testosterone:

Extract 6.19: TDOV Update

1	**Gregory**	I'm taking the uh (.) testostogel? (.) just like two pumps a day uh (.) I'm not
2		fond of needles so I just didn't go for the needle option 'cause you can
3		take the gel and then after you've been taking it for a while you can switch
4		to the- the <u>needles</u> if you want? (.) but I'm not particularly fond of needles
5		so I'll just be sticking uh (.) with the ge::l

Initially, Gregory speaks somewhat hesitantly, pronouncing the word 'testostogel' – itself seemingly a mispronunciation of the brand of testosterone Gregory uses, 'Testogel' – with a rising inflection and tip of his head indexing uncertainty. As he goes on, however, Gregory takes a more confident and assertive stance, indexing expertise and positioning himself as informed in his decision to use Testogel and aware of alternative formulations. His claim that 'you can take the gel and then after you've been taking it for a while you can switch to the- the <u>needles</u>' (lines 2-4) reflects the typical process of his care provider, in which testosterone gel is recommended to those taking testosterone for the first time as it can be self-administered at home without the need for additional appointments or self-injection training (GenderGP, 2024). Gregory's switch to direct address shows a shift in positioning to briefly take up the role of an educator, using the second-person pronoun 'you' to create the impression that he is speaking directly to the hypothetical viewer to inform them of alternative options available to them. In doing so, Gregory moves from simply using social

media to document his own transition experience to actively acknowledging the status of his vlogs as a potential resource for others, sharing additional knowledge that might otherwise be inaccessible to those who have not had to opportunity to meet with a gender-affirming care provider.

Though Gregory positions himself as an expert with regards to the process of transition, he clearly delineates between his personal affective stance towards needles and any generalised evaluation of the different formulations. By using first-person pronouns when he says ‘I’m not fond of needles’ (lines 1-2), Gregory positions his aversion to needles as personal and not relevant to any decisions a potential viewer might make. When offering alternatives, he addresses the viewer directly and foregrounds their personal desires when he says ‘if you want’ (line 4), positioning both options as equally viable depending on an individual’s desires. In shifting between a personal affective stance and a more detached expert one in this way, Gregory negotiates a balance between sharing his experiences as an individual and fulfilling a secondary role as an educator.

While Gregory’s knowledge of the official policies of his care provider act as a form of ‘insider knowledge’ with which he can authenticate his expert identity in the previous example, it is far more common for Gregory to construct expertise through positioning himself as a member of a broader online community of transgender people. In the following extract from Gregory’s 2-month update, he discusses changes in his voice, drawing on a construction of transgender community consensus in order to legitimate his expert identity:

Extract 6.20: 2 Months on T Update

1	**Gregory**	I’m definitely getting like (.) T cough? (.) which is the cough you get when
2		your voice is going through like another change?
		[…]
3		um (.) haven’t really noticed that much (.) in terms of like (.) any:: (.)
4		serious changes? (.) but like I feel- kind of feel like my throat’s getting
5		tighter? (.) um it’s definitely nothing else um (.) ‘cause I’ve like tested and
6		it’s not covid (.) but a lot of people in the Facebook group that with which is
7		a bunch of other transgender people like me? (.) yeah they’ve noticed uh
8		(.) you do get like a change sort of like feeling (.) here (.) kind of? (.) and
9		you will get like a dry throat and a cough but it’d not like an actual cold it’s
10		a (.) just another voice change

In the first part of the extract, taken from a quick introductory summary of changes he will discuss later in the vlog, Gregory introduces discussion of vocal changes by stating that he has ‘T cough’, a term used in transgender online discourse to describe the commonly reported experience of cold-like symptoms associated with early vocal masculinisation. In addition to authenticating his transgender identity, this use of jargon indexes a specific kind of expert identity that is rooted in Gregory’s involvement with online trans communities. Unlike the previous example in which Gregory draws on his knowledge of medical and institutional practices to construct and educator identity, Gregory draws on the *experiential* expertise of other trans people to construct an expert identity that is more akin to that of a community mentor figure. By demonstrating his familiarity with the shared linguistic repertoire of transgender online imagined communities, Gregory is able to authenticate his

identity as a reliable source of community lay expertise. Furthermore, his decision to immediately define the term ‘T cough’ foregrounds its status as jargon, signalling that those without his experience are likely to be unfamiliar with it. This strengthens Gregory’s expert positioning, introducing an imagined novice viewer both to what they can expect when starting testosterone and also the terminology required to participate in conversations about these experiences within the sphere of transgender online discourse.

The importance of other transgender people’s experience in supporting Gregory’s own claim to expertise can be seen in the second part of the extract, where Gregory recounts the experiences of others in a transgender community Facebook group to position his interpretation of his own experience as correct via collective consensus. Initially, Gregory takes a strong epistemic stance when he positions the ambiguous experience of throat tightness to vocal masculinisation caused by testosterone, asserting that ‘it’s definitely nothing else’ (line 5). Gregory appeals to two external sources of authority to legitimate his interpretation. Firstly, Gregory draws on the objectivity associated with medical testing to rule out Covid-19 as a possible cause of his symptoms. This strategy, however, cannot be applied to the vast majority of other potential causes, so he shifts his strategy to positioning his attribution of these symptoms to testosterone as reasonable. To achieve this, Gregory positions his own experience to similar to that of others he has interacted with in a Facebook group, relying on the expertise gained by other transgender people through lived experiences to position his own symptoms as a part of a normal medical transition. The claim that this experience has been reported by ‘a lot of people’ (line 6) and the emphasis placed on the fact that he has consulted ‘a bunch of transgender people’ (line 7) works to construct a shared experience of medical transition that recontextualises the otherwise ambiguous symptom of throat tightness into a widely accepted part of vocal masculinisation on testosterone.

This is reinforced through the tactic of adequation when Gregory describes the Facebook group members as ‘transgender people like me’ (line 7), positioning his own identity and experience as sufficiently similar to theirs as to make their insight relevant to how he should interpret his own. This works in conjunction with how he speaks about other group members, referring to them exclusively as a collective representing a shared identity for transitioning transmasculine people. This positions Gregory’s own experience as part of a wider shared experience, legitimating his interpretation of his symptoms through an appeal to normativity and aiding in his construction of an authentic transgender identity. This legitimation tactic is used frequently across Gregory’s testosterone update vlogs, with Gregory invoking the experiences of others in this group at least once in every video. As in Extract 6.5, this is typically done when discussing experiences that Gregory frames as unexpected, such as having experienced vocal changes unusually early (as discussed in his TDOV video) or stopping menstruation earlier than he anticipated (in his two-month update), with community consensus used to legitimate his own judgement in attributing these changes to testosterone.

The frequency with which Gregory reports seeking information and reassurance from this group also speaks to his personal relationship with these groups, positioning them as a reliable source of peer support that he is able to turn to for concerns and queries that would typically be considered too insignificant to warrant contacting a care provider. This is particularly true for Gregory as his care was overseen by a private clinic following negative experiences attempting to access gender-affirming care on the NHS, meaning asking these

questions directly to his care provider would likely incur a consultation fee. In these circumstances, these online groups provide an avenue for free, personalised information from others with similar experiences in a way that would be difficult to replicate via offline support options, especially given Gregory's additional access requirements as a wheelchair user.

Finally, Gregory's use of language in describing how others in the group report their experiences positions these narratives as authoritative, with the construction 'they've noticed' (line 7) framing this experience of throat tightness and 'T cough' as a distinct, undisputed phenomenon that others have observed. By drawing on the experiences of others to construct a normative model of transition that aligns with his own experiences, Gregory transforms his own lived experience into expertise and the basis for generalisable advice. This begins with how Gregory recounts the experiences of others, stating 'they've noticed (.) you do get like a change sort of like feeling (.) here (.) kind of?' (line 8). Gregory's shift in pronouns from the third-person plural to the generalised 'you' in 'they've noticed (.) you do get like a change' backgrounds the subjective perspectives of these other trans people and instead positions their experience as universal. Similarly, Gregory motions to his own throat to demonstrate where one might expect to feel this sensation (Figure 6.5), positioning his own body as a visual stand-in for a generalised 'transitioning body' which viewers may substitute for their own in constructing a hypothetical future transition. In lines 9-10, Gregory positions himself as an expert informing a hypothetical pre-transition viewer of what to expect from their transition, staying that 'you will get like a dry throat and a cough but it's not an actual cold it's a (.) just another voice change.' Through his choice of modal verb and vocal stress in 'you will', Gregory's epistemic stance suggests a high degree of certainty, positioning himself as informed and authoritative while positioning his experiences of throat tightness and 'T cough' as universal. This is reinforced by the use of the adverb 'just' in 'just another voice change,' positioning the potentially upsetting experience of 'a dry throat and a cough' as merely part of the taken-for-granted effects of testosterone. In this way, Gregory positions his own experience as something for viewers to potentially learn from, demonstrating the intertwined nature of his personal narratives and his role as an educator of others.

In every case, Gregory invokes the experience of others to position his own experiences as normative and expected, highlighting not only the importance of community knowledge in constructing his expertise in these vlogs, but also Gregory's construction of his own transition as similar to that of others. Notably, while Gregory does regularly index a disabled identity in his transition videos through the sharing of anecdotes where his condition or particular symptoms are made relevant, he frequently foregrounds the similarities between his experiences on testosterone and those of other transgender men, positioning his medical transition as largely normative. In this way, Gregory further positions his own experiences with HRT as generalisable despite his disability positioning him outside of the dominant able-bodied norm for trans bodies constructed in most popular transition vlogs (Raun, 2015a).

Extract 6.21: TDOV Update

1	**Gregory**	so:: I've technically been on testosterone for sixteen days (.) which is just
2		over uh (.) two weeks (.) it doesn't really (.) feel like anything awful? (.) um
3		(1.0) it feels good actually I feel like I'm more likely to go through (.)

puberty like properly because I feel like (.) with my condition and the way that it affects my growth um (.) I didn't really feel like I'd gone through puberty properly and I stopped growing at like nine (.) I only had like sma::ll increments of height like randomly (.) so while I'm not expecting to like grow (.) any taller? (.) or like change shoe sizes? (.) I don't think? (.) um I'm kind of welcoming any changes that come with this (.) so I just wanted to update (.) on that (.) especially for today

In this extract, taken from an off-schedule vlog posted to mark Trans Day of Visibility, Gregory talks about his experience and expectations for starting testosterone in the context of his physical disability. In our interviews, Gregory discussed how his access to gender-affirming care was complicated by the nature of his disability and his feelings of uncertainty regarding what medical transition might look like for him. Although this is not discussed explicitly in his vlogs, Gregory introduces the idea that his expectations for how he would experience being on testosterone may not align with dominant narratives when he says that being on testosterone 'doesn't really (.) feel like anything awful? (.) um (1.0) it feels good actually' (lines 2-3). His use of the adverb 'actually' suggests that his positive experience on testosterone is somewhat surprising or in conflict with what he might have expected, contrasting with transnormative constructions of transgender identity which position gender-affirming HRT as universally and unambiguously positive for transgender people. In this view, authentic transgender identity is predicated largely on bodily gender dysphoria, which can only be mitigated through gender-affirming medical interventions. Acknowledging that one might anticipate negative experiences with HRT could, in this sense, be seen as a threat to Gregory's transgender identity construction. However, in lines 3-9, Gregory discusses the impact his disability had on his experience of puberty, differentiating this experience from the abled norm and thus contextualising his uncertainty as to whether he would experience HRT in a similarly non-normative way.

Gregory positions his use of testosterone as an opportunity to 'go through (.) puberty like properly' (lines 3-4). This use and emphasis of 'properly' positions his earlier experience of puberty as somehow improper or incomplete, offering the specific example of having not experienced a teenage growth spurt (Gregory's adult height is just over four feet tall). This invokes a normative ideal of puberty defined by various milestones that Gregory feels have been inaccessible to him due to his disability, though it is notable that the specific example he chooses to highlight is one of the few milestones that does not carry gendered associations; adolescents are typically expected to grow significantly during puberty regardless of gender/sex. Although this may be, in part, to avoid highlighting aspects of his embodiment that are normatively associated with femaleness, it also reveals the interplay between Gregory's disabled and transgender identity in his experiences of 'improper' puberty. Indeed, although Gregory states that he believes testosterone is 'more likely' to allow him to experience puberty 'like properly', he also clarifies that he is 'not expecting to like grow (.) any taller? (.) or like change shoe sizes?' (lines 7-8) in a way that would counteract the example he had given to position his prior experience of puberty as *not* proper. Instead, Gregory foregrounds his affective stance through his repeated use of the word 'feel', as in 'I didn't really feel like I'd gone through puberty properly' (lines 5-6). This anchors Greogry's expectations not in achieving the normative (and therefore abled) ideal post-pubescent body and instead emphasises his personal evaluation of what a 'proper'

puberty ought to *feel* like. In this way, Gregory mirrors transnormative discourses of 'wrong puberty' than emerge from the dominant 'born in the wrong body' narrative of transgender identity (Johnson, 2015; Borba, 2019), positioning HRT as a means to correct a puberty that is improper, at least in part, due to its conflict with an individual's desired embodiment. This framing draws together Gregory's trans and disabled identities, foregrounding Gregory's embodiment as a disabled transgender man and positioning HRT as a route to achieving a more normative masculine embodiment across both facets of his identity.

Finally, Gregory concludes Extract 6.6, and the video as a whole, with 'especially for today' (line 10). This highlights again that this vlog was created to mark TDOV, breaking from the once-monthly format that is typical for transition vlogs and which he otherwise stuck to throughout the observation period. In this video, Gregory speaks more extensively about his disability than is typical for his transition vlogs, reflecting a desire to be visible not only as a trans man, but specifically as a disabled trans man. The importance of disabled visibility to Gregory is apparent in some of his other social media posts, such as the example in Figure 6.6, and he spoke in interviews about how a lack of transgender representation for bodies like his own, both online and offline, made it harder for him to picture a future for himself as a trans man. However, while Gregory spoke with me about offering advice to other disabled trans people in private contexts such as Facebook groups and direct messages, Gregory typically minimises the ways in which his experience of transition may differ from others' due to his disability in his transition vlogs. Instead, Gregory foregrounds the similarities between his experiences and a constructed shared experience of a normative transition drawn from his experiences with online transgender communities. In doing this, Gregory simultaneously makes his existence as a disabled transgender man visible while rejecting the idea that his experience is marginal or irrelevant to others, contributing to an online genre of community informational resources while challenging the dominance of abled trans bodies in this style of video.



Figure 6.8: A tweet made by Gregory praising an episode of Naked Attraction which featured representation of gay and disabled transgender men

Though Gregory was the only participant to construct an online educator or activist identity in his social media posts and interviews, he was not the only participant who spoke about being actively invested in the development of online community informational resources. While all of my participants spoke about social media having provided important information and resources to them in the past, particularly prior to coming out, one participant, Blåhaj, positioned social media as a consistent source of information that facilitated her ongoing medical transition. Notably, Blåhaj was under the care of a gender-affirming care provider but was dissatisfied with her care and felt that her provider lacked the knowledge or motivation to address issues she encountered in her transition, leading her to seek additional resources online. Though Blåhaj had chosen not to disclose her transgender identity on her

public facing social media accounts, she was able to remain an active participant in transgender online communities through private, invite-only Discord servers. This allowed her to connect with others taking a 'DIY' (do it yourself) approach to transition, participating in communities of practice where transgender users would share their experiences, offer advice, and engage in community research and self-study to develop community knowledge in the absence of adequate medical expertise (Epstein, 1995).

Extract 6.22

Blåhaj uh in some of these groups I don't know if it's (.) it's probably not very safe but in some of these groups some people do like their own studies on- on like hormones and stuff and that's probably very low-quality research but y'know (.) if no one else is going to do it in their medical capacity? @@@

Gabe @@ I guess sometimes [it's the best you've got?]

Blåhaj [sometimes it's like we're going] to have to do that (.) exactly yeah (.) yeah it's like (.) the people who start these studies y'know they want (.) they want what's best for themselves as well and (.) I guess they're hoping that they'll find something <u>interesting</u> when it comes to hormones or y'know (.) the effect they can have?

Gabe mhm

Blåhaj and everyone's constantly trying to maximise their effect just from dysphoria reasons?

Gabe yeah

Blåhaj I guess that's a good reason in and of itself yeah (.) yeah so long as you're moderately careful and healthy @@

Gabe I guess it's- it's good yeah to have data from a wide variety of people as well that isn't just shown in like averages and stuff?

Blåhaj yeah

Gabe that people can say this was my experience this is what happened for me especially with the effects being so varied for different people and goals (.) I guess being so different for different people sometimes

Blåhaj yeah the medical literature seems very <u>dated</u> so- and so do a lot of the- the providers? (.) sometimes it <u>is</u> best to look in more (.) I guess up to date places even if (1.0) I don't know (.) yeah even if they're not as sort of set in stone yet? (.) as long as they're not super unsafe you don't really lose that much by trying

In this extract, Blåhaj discusses her use of Discord to access private online communities dedicated to compiling information and resources to support DIYers. Blåhaj was a member of several such servers and used them for a variety of purposes, such as undertaking voice training without the guidance of a speech therapist, though the focus of the current analysis is her involvement in communities based around accessing and administering gender-affirming hormone therapy without a medical prescription. Here, Blåhaj discusses having participated in informal research experiments to produce new and community-sourced

knowledge about the use and efficacy of hormones to maximise their desired effects. While DIY HRT has historically been through of as a last-resort alternative to professionalised medical care for trans people who cannot access care by other means, the reality for many people is less straightforward; some trans people who *do* have access to gender-affirming medical care nevertheless choose to DIY aspects of their transition for a variety of reasons (August-Rae, Baker and Buzzanell, 2024). Some, like Blåhaj, take a blended approach, using resources from online DIY communities to supplement prescribed HRT in order to achieve their goals and take control of their care.

Although feminising hormones such as oestrogen and progesterone are not controlled substances (unlike testosterone) and their acquisition for personal use without a UK prescription is not illegal, the practice remains marginalised and is frequently framed as dangerous or irresponsible. Blåhaj signals her awareness of DIY HRT's contentious reputation, cutting off her introduction to discussion of these Discord servers and the citizen science they engage in to disclaim 'I don't know if it's (.) it's probably not very safe' (line 1). Blåhaj's modification of her initial epistemic stance ('I don't know') to take the more critical evaluative stance ('it's probably not very safe') demonstrates her negotiation of a responsible, informed identity in the face of DIY HRT's reputation as a high-risk practice. While 'I don't know' would risk characterising Blåhaj as uninformed and thus her participation as naïve or reckless, evaluating the research as 'probably not very safe' instead positions her as agentive, having considered the potential risks and made an informed decision to participate despite them. Her negative stance is softened by her use of the negative construction 'not very safe'. The adverb 'very' frames safety as a gradable quality, suggesting that, while these groups' activities may not achieve high standards of safety, they are not necessarily *unsafe*, with her use of 'probably' positioning any implied risks as not certain. This allows Blåhaj to respond to the discourses of risk surrounding DIY HRT and self-experimentation while also not condemning her own actions, participation, or community, constructing an informed, agentive identity position.

Throughout this first turn, Blåhaj affirms the hypothetical value of medical expertise and institutional backing, positioning the work of authorised medical researchers working 'in their medical capacity' (line 4) as more likely to be safe and high-quality, and therefore preferable to the lay expertise of DIY communities. This may be in part due to the privileged status of medical expertise in dominant discourse and the stigma associated with non-experts who attempt to give medical advice, particularly in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw a significant uptick in medical conspiracies and harmful alternative treatments promoted by laypeople (Birchall and Knight, 2022). By emphasising that this self-experimentation is likely to be lower quality than medical research, Blåhaj aligns herself with the normative view that medical expertise is legitimate and valuable. Although her own participation in developing her communities' lay expertise can be viewed as an implicit endorsement, she positions this as conditional when she says, 'if no one else is going to do it in their medical capacity?' (line 4). This foregrounds the lack of equivalent research performed by those with medical expertise, contextualising the practices of these online communities of practice as a response to the marginalisation of transgender health within healthcare institutions.

Blåhaj's repeated hedging and qualifying of her support for DIY HRT communities throughout this first turn signals her discomfort in negotiating such a potentially controversial issue, with her questioning intonation and nervous laughter at the end of line 4 prompting a supportive stance from myself as the interviewer. By mirroring Blåhaj's laughter and offering

the hypothetical ‘I guess sometimes [it’s the best you’ve got?]’ (line 5), I index my support of Blåhaj’s characterisation of community-driven research as a necessary and appropriate response to insufficient medical knowledge, which is in turn positioned as laughable and unreasonable. This aligns with Blåhaj’s positioning in her overlapping speech when she says ‘[sometimes it’s like we’re going] to have to do that (.) exactly yeah’ (lines 6-7), with the modal construction ‘we’re going to have’ positioning the development of lay expertise as a necessity or obligation rather than a choice. Additionally, the plural pronoun ‘we’ aligns Blåhaj with a broader community of transgender people who are not having their needs met. Positioning the development of lay expertise as necessary has the effect of legitimating the lay expert identities of the community members despite their lack of institutional authority, appealing instead to this necessity and the more abstract ideological ideals of innovation and self-sufficiency in the face of hardship. In doing so, Blåhaj simultaneously undermines the expertise afforded by medical institutions by foregrounding the failure of mainstream medicine to produce sufficient research to address the concerns of transgender people as a whole.

This authorisation largely depends on the positioning of these communities’ actions as reasonable as opposed to reckless or deviant. To achieve this, Blåhaj foregrounds the transgender identity of the community organisers and positions their behaviour as sufficiently similar to how one might expect transgender people to behave when she states that ‘the people who start these studies y’know (.) they want (.) they want what’s best for themselves too’ (lines 7-8). In this case, the transgender identity of these lay experts is relevant as it aligns their interests with those of an imagined transgender community, with the adverb ‘too’ highlighting that these organisers also stand to benefit. This has the further impact of suggesting that those organising Discord-based studies are incentivised to work towards producing safe and reliable information as doing so would be in their own best interest. Blåhaj constructs shared experience to further align this DIY research with typical transgender experience with her assertion that ‘everyone’s constantly trying to maximise their effects just from dysphoria reasons’ (lines 12-13). Her use of the pronoun ‘everyone’ positions this behaviour as an extension of a universal response to gender dysphoria. By drawing on this constructed shared experience, Blåhaj foregrounds the similarity between DIY HRT researchers’ hopes to ‘find something <u>interesting</u> when it comes to hormones of y’know (.) the effect they can have’ (lines 9-10) and a collective desire among trans people to manipulate the effects of hormone replacement therapy to best tackle gender dysphoria, positioning the practice as a continuation, or perhaps formalisation, of normative behaviour. This challenges common illegitimating discourses that position DIY HRT as a deviant, dangerous, or fringe practice, instead drawing on transnormative narratives to position it as part of a reasonable and understandable desire to ‘maximise’ the gender-affirming properties of various hormones.

Despite Blåhaj’s stronger positive evaluation throughout these turns, her persistent use of rising intonation inviting agreement and nervous laughter signals unease with the topic. Her repetition of ‘yeah’ in line 15 suggests self-reassurance as she negotiates the complexity of taking a positive stance towards a taboo practice when she asserts that there is a ‘good reason’ to participate in community research, which she later modifies with the caveat ‘so long as you’re moderately careful and healthy @@’ (lines 15-16). This allows her to acknowledge the risks, particularly to those for whom self-experimentation may exacerbate existing illness, but positions these as avoidable with sufficient care. The premodifier ‘moderately’ indexes awareness of and ability to exercise differing degrees of caution while

also not prescribing any specific behaviours, signalling Blåhaj's expertise as a community member and DIYer but avoiding both the taboo of offering explicit advice on the practice and making the specifics of her knowledge vulnerable to challenge. Suggesting that one only needs to be 'moderately' careful also minimises the potential risks, characterising the care required to avoid them as not necessarily demanding or rigorous. In lines 17-18 and 20-22, I similarly offer a tentatively positive stance to reassure and align myself with Blåhaj, returning to an earlier point of conversation in which Blåhaj had talked about her frustrations with a previous provider's practice of prescribing a standardised dose that was insufficient for her needs by stating that it may be beneficial to have data that 'isn't just shown in like averages' (line 18) and acknowledges the experiential expertise of individual trans people. My repetition of 'so varied' (line 21) and 'so different' (line 22) when talking about the experiences and goals of transitioning people foregrounds the complexity and unpredictability of gender transition. This draws on dominant discourses within trans communities that position individuals as the leading experts on their own transitions, goals, and experiences (Dame, 2013; August-Rae, Baker and Buzzanell, 2024) to in turn position the experiential expertise of individual transgender people as a useful supplementary or alternative perspective to standardised guidelines. This positioning is taken up by Blåhaj when she responds 'yeah the medical literature seems very dated so- and so do a lot of the- the providers?' (lines 23-24), with the adjective 'dated' framing this standardised approach as old-fashioned and no longer applicable, in contrast to the more 'up to date' (line 24) research circulated in DIY communities that may not be 'set in stone yet' (lines 25-26).[5]

Throughout this extract, Blåhaj articulates a complex relationship between the online communities of lay experts in which she participates and medical expertise and institutions. While she validates the authority of medical expertise and its association with producing safer and higher quality medical research, she also positions medical institutions as passive and complacent, relying on outdated literature and practices and failing to expand medical knowledge in such a way as to necessitate the development of lay expertise. Blåhaj positions herself and her community as somewhat unwilling experts, developing counterhegemonic structures of knowledge in a relatively secretive way out of necessity rather than embracing a public-facing educator role such as that of Gregory and other trans vloggers. This aligns with Epstein's (1995) observation that members of marginalised communities will develop lay expertise where their needs are not prioritised or addressed by medical research and expertise, often familiarising themselves with existing medical research, engaging in self-study, and compiling the lived experiences of affected individuals. Though it is rarely explicitly stated throughout our discussion, it is merely taken-for-granted that the use of social media technologies, in this case Discord, is necessary to organise, produce, and maintain access to this information. Though transgender people have always been sharing information and providing support in discrete ways, it would scarcely be possible for such large global communities of trans people to organise and work collaboratively yet inconspicuously on citizen science projects without the use of social

[5] This discourse is frequently circulated in the UK regarding the hormone progesterone, which the NHS has not approved for use in gender-affirming HRT. In light of research suggesting that progesterone may have a variety of benefits for transfeminine people, such as aiding in breast development (Prior, 2019), some private providers have begun prescribing the hormone and the practice of obtaining progesterone as a DIY supplement to NHS HRT has become increasingly common (Leeds GIS, 2023). Calls for the NHS to update their guidelines on progesterone in femininizing HRT not been successful, with many viewing this as evidence of the NHS's refusal to embrace new research.

media technologies. Blåhaj foregrounds the importance of these online communities as a necessary response to the inadequacy of resources available through offline means, including directly from care providers. Without social media technologies, then, transgender people such as Blåhaj would have limited agency in responding to inadequate care options.

For both Gregory and Blåhaj, social media facilitates involvement with generating broader community lay expertise, contributing in both public and private ways. Though Gregory's transition vlogs and Blåhaj's involvement in DIY HRT communities may initially seem to have little in common, both challenge and subvert dominant hierarchies of expertise and position individual transgender people as experts in their own experiences of transition. In Gregory's case, institutional medical authority and community expertise exist side-by-side, and he positions community expertise as equally worthy of transmission to his audience in his role as an educator as information more directly related to professional medicine. For Blåhaj, the expertise of professional medical researchers and institutions is constructed as superior in terms of access to the skills and resources required to conduct safe and high quality research, but the value of this expertise to her community is conditioned upon adequate attention being paid to the needs and desires of those seeking gender-affirming care. In reality, Blåhaj constructs an expert identity based not on exceptional medical knowledge or skill, but rather as part of her construction of a resistant identity, working with her community to overcome the dearth of institutional resources dedicated to serving their needs. In both cases, Gregory and Blåhaj position the compiled experiences of other transgender people as authoritative, relying on trusted online communities of practice for guidance concerning their medical transition and contributing their own lived experience of transition to further the development of this alternative expertise, particularly where institutional resources cannot address their concerns. These examples powerfully illustrate the role social media technologies can play in facilitating both individual and community-wide resistance to the marginalisation of transgender people and their needs in broader culture, taking advantage of social media's ability to connect and organise large groups of people to meaningfully collaborate and support each other in ways that would not be feasible via offline networks.

6.5 Conclusion

Overall, the key theme that emerged from this analysis was that of agency. In interviews, participants used concepts such as 'freedom', 'control', and 'authenticity' to contrast their offline and online identity construction, positioning online social contexts as enabling authentic identity construction that was not attainable in offline contexts. In other cases, participants used online social media contexts to recontextualise negative offline experiences with misgendering and construct resistant, authentic transgender identities despite them. Finally, the final two examples reveal the complex ways that participants offline and online lives are deeply intertwined in ways that expand their agency in ways beyond what would be possible without social media technologies. While these diverse examples speak to the variation and complexity of participants' experience with constructing identities as transgender people across online, offline, and increasingly hybrid social contexts, it reveals the importance of social media contexts in allowing them to feel empowered and express themselves as transgender people, and how this experience is inextricably linked to their experiences of everyday marginalisation.

7 Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter brings together the emerging themes across my data and analysis in Chapters 4 through 6 and further explores how they provide answers to the following research questions:

RQ7. How do my participants construct imagined audiences in response to different forms of online surveillance across social media contexts?

RQ8. How does the social media context shape the identities constructed by my participants as transgender people?

RQ9. How does participants' online identity construction interact with their offline identity construction – how is it enabled and constrained?

In order to answer the above questions clearly and thoroughly, this chapter discusses each one in turn. Because these research questions address intertwined aspects of my participants' social media use – since constructing an identity through social media entails negotiating both an audience and the user's offline identity – there are necessarily some overlaps between them, though each discussion highlights different aspects of my participants' complex online identity practices.

Section 7.2 focuses on RQ1, particularly considering the issues of context collapse and how my participants constructed different imagined audiences to inform their identity construction across different online social contexts. I consider how my participants construct their relationships with automated surveillance and the value of exploring these complex interactions between human and technology through an intersubjective, identity-focused lens. Section 7.3 addresses RQ2, highlighting the issues of agency and access in my participants' online identity construction and how this relates to their experiences as transgender young adults. Section 7.4, addressing RQ3, is concerned with the intersection between online and offline, revealing how my findings problematise this distinction and the complex ways that my participants integrate social media into their everyday lives to achieve their social goals. Section 7.5 focuses specifically on methodological considerations that have not been addressed in earlier sections. While discussion of my methodology and analytical approach is inseparable from discussion of my research questions, Section 7.5 covers broader reflections on aspects of my methodological approach such as my role as a researcher, reflections on carrying out research of this kind in an ethical way, and possible limitations, as well as how these may point to directions for future research. Finally, Section 7.6, considers my findings in the context of wider social and political trends and draws connections to the broader goal of transgender liberation, followed by a brief concluding section in Section 7.7.

7.2 RQ1 – How do my participants construct imagined audiences in response to different forms of online surveillance across social media contexts?

7.2.1 Introduction

Typically, the invisibility of online audiences significantly complicates users' ability to predict the makeup of their actual social media audience. In the absence of knowledge about its nature, it can be especially challenging for social media users to meaningfully respond to

online surveillance. This is coupled with the fact that online surveillance may come from multiple sources with competing purposes, both human and non-human. One strategy my participants used to respond to online surveillance was constructing an imagined audience; analysing my participants' construction of their imagined audiences and how they positioned themselves in relation to them offers insights into their perceptions of how salient different kinds of online surveillance are, as well as the more complex strategies they use to negotiate their identity in light of this.

7.2.2 Context Collapse and Human Audiences

In considering how my participants construct imagined audiences in their responses to online surveillance, I first want to return to the key concept of 'context collapse' as an entry point to this discussion. As per my introduction of the concept in Chapter 2.8, context collapse encompasses the challenges that emerge where audiences and relationships that typically exist in distinct and separate social contexts, such as coworkers and family members, are brought together in a single social context (Marwick and boyd, 2011). Social media often enables context collapse as social connections from multiple areas of one's life may be amassed into a singular audience with diverse and competing expectations (boyd, 2014), though previous research has identified several strategies that social media users can employ to mitigate this (Litt, 2012; Costa, 2018; Pitcan, Marwick and boyd, 2018). As discussed in Chapter 4, my participants typically positioned context collapse as a problem limited to specific online social contexts and/or platforms, rather than intrinsic to social media. When participants spoke about context collapse outside of these specific contexts, the issue was most often characterised as a source of past struggle and something that participants still had to consider in their online identity construction but did not impose meaningful constraints that they were unequipped to manage. This may be in part due to the growing awareness of online privacy concerns and the mainstreaming of social media use, shifting context collapse from a novel issue to an expected and understood aspect of social media use that my participants take proactive steps to avoid (Duffy and Chan, 2019). In general, my participants made use of both public and private accounts, social media privacy settings, and a variety of technical tools and behavioural strategies in response to the challenges posed by invisible and potentially infinite online audiences, and most positioned themselves as experts in doing so.

However, context collapse was highlighted as problematic where it concerned those with whom participants had pre-existing offline relationships. For my participants, the idea that their posts may be visible to strangers was rarely positioned as a concern during discussions of privacy, even for participants who primarily or exclusively used public accounts. Instead, they overwhelmingly positioned publicness as problematic due to the risk that one's 'public' audience may hide certain individuals with whom participants had a personal relationship. In these cases, the invisibility of (public) social media audiences was not a problem insofar as *anyone* could be viewing their posts without their knowledge, but that this unidentifiable mass audience may hide a few specific *someone*s from participants' offline networks. For this reason, the solutions to my participants' struggles with context collapse had to extend beyond merely using privacy controls and technical tools made available by social media sites, since their imagined audiences and understanding of online surveillance shaped by complex experiences of social surveillance across both online and offline social contexts.

7.2.2.1 'Problem' platforms

In my data, participants primarily associated issues of context collapse with the platforms Facebook and Instagram, both owned by parent company Meta and sharing several features to facilitate integration between the two platforms. Previous research has highlighted Facebook as a particularly challenging platform in terms of context collapse, particularly among transgender users (Haimson *et al.*, 2015), highlighting policies such as Facebook's requirement that users use their 'real name' (Lingel and Golub, 2015; Cho, 2018) and the focus in the platform's marketing on bringing together diverse offline relationships under the collective banner of Facebook 'friends' (Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin, 2008). This positioning of Facebook as posing unique challenges was most apparent in interview data from my older participants, particularly Gregory, Ash, Colin, and Bee, who had all used the platform for over a decade and accrued a diverse audience of 'friends' including family, friends, acquaintances, and current and former colleagues and classmates. These participants typically constructed their Facebook audience differently to their audiences on other platforms, emphasising the fact that many of their Facebook 'friends' were the result of offline relationships and social pressure as opposed to shared interests or values. During interviews, these participants often employed the tactic of distinction to foreground a lack of alignment with this type of online audience (see Extract 4.6, as an example). For my younger participants, particularly Ethan and Lyra, Instagram was positioned similarly as the 'default' social media platform for connecting with others in one's offline life, with Ethan foregrounding this similarity with his analogy that Instagram is 'like Facebook for people under twenty-five'. This shift from Facebook to Instagram is likely in part due to the decreasing popularity of Facebook among younger social media users (Ofcom, 2023) and may be encouraged by Meta's growing integration between the two platforms, which increases the convenience with which those already using Facebook can add Instagram to their polymedia repertoire.

In both cases, it is clear that participants position online audiences that are based *primarily* on offline connections as fundamentally different to – and more problematic than – those based on common interests. This is likely influenced by the way that online imagined communities and subcultures develop norms and shared practices related to their shared interests (Cavalcante, 2019; Keller, 2019; Heritage and Koller, 2020; McInroy, Zapcic and Beer, 2022), whereas audiences based upon offline connections may have little in common beyond having a relationship to the participant. This lack of clear social norms to use as a framework complicates the task of constructing an imagined audience that is sufficiently aligned to serve as a useful model in determining what constitutes an appropriate and legible identity for one's audience. In these cases, the relationships between participant and audience are simultaneously anchored in the online context and the offline contexts in which individual relationships were formed, with the social media serving more as an 'umbrella' context to which audience members may transfer their normative expectations from a diverse range of offline contexts, rather than forming a more unified set of online community norms.

7.2.2.2 High-risk relationships

This distinction between online imagined community audiences and online audiences based in offline relationships is evident in how my participants constructed their imagined audiences for these platforms during interviews. In the case of these 'problem platforms', participants typically constructed specific, identifiable audience members or archetypes they positioned as central to their experiences of context collapse, such as 'nosy family members' or 'ignorant co-workers'. This aligns with earlier research suggesting that social media users

are often most concerned with how their online identity construction will be interpreted by specific known audiences, particularly where this relates to family (boyd, 2015; Gorea, 2021) or may have an impact on professional or academic opportunities (Pitcan, Marwick and boyd, 2018; Duffy and Chan, 2019). These relationships and the expectations that come along with them are much easier to grasp than the more nebulous demands of an unknowable 'public' audience that is potentially infinite in both size and diversity, and so too are the social and economic consequences of failing to meet them (Dienlin and Metzger, 2016). For example, Bee was very conscious of the homophobic attitudes of their co-workers and frequently foregrounded their vulnerability to both social and professional discrimination as a result (see discussion in Chapter 4.3.3), while Gregory highlighted the negative emotional impact of familial conflict triggered by this social media posts (Extract 4.2). In these cases, participants' experiential knowledge of the social norms that shape their identity construction across various personal and professional contexts in their offline life likely contributed to their acute awareness of context collapse when considering those in their offline network. Participants therefore tended to construct specific and detailed archetypes to represent different categories of offline relationship among their imagined audience, increasing their awareness of the conflict between both the expectations of different segments of their potential online audiences and their own self-perception while also allowing them to better respond to their demands.

This strategy can be illustrated effectively using data from a single participant, Ash. There is a clear parallel between Ash's construction of their co-workers in the tweets analysed in Chapter 6.3 (Figure 6.2) and their construction of their imagined audience on Facebook in Extract 4.6, among whom they had previously identified their co-workers as a particularly problematic presence. Ash's construction of their imaged Facebook audience is particularly detailed, giving voice to hypothetical responses and positioning these as what 'all the comments would have been'. Ash's construction of epistemic certainty through their unmitigated assertion that their Facebook audience 'wouldn't have got' their queer identity construction suggests that they feel well informed about the contextual knowledge and ideological positioning of their imagined audience in this instance. This mirrors their construction of their co-workers in the tweets analysed in Chapter 6.3, with both examples highlighting Ash's conscious strategy of aligning with transnormative ideals as part of their work to construct a legible nonbinary identity, while also characterising their audience as ignorant. Similarly, both examples foreground the inappropriate imposition of the identity label 'woman' onto Ash and make use of linguistic features such as repetition (Extract 4.6) and temporal descriptors such as 'all day' (Figure 6.2) to position this as persistent and unrelenting. This example provides some insight into the complex interplay between 'online' and 'offline' identity construction. Naturally, the expectations of those members of a user's online audience with whom they interact regularly offline are likely to be more salient than those for whom the user has little frame of reference, but these examples also reveal the crucial role of power and agency in participants' experience of context collapse, particularly when considering professional relationships. For my participants, the issue of context collapse was often directly intertwined with their experiences of offline prejudice and precarity as marginalised individuals (Cho, 2018; Pitcan, Marwick and boyd, 2018), placing similar constraints on their identity construction (see also Extract 4.7).

This does beg the question of why participants choose to extend these 'high-risk' offline relationships into online social contexts if doing so imposes such constraints. As mentioned previously, all of my participants felt confident taking advantage of private accounts and

privacy controls to manage their audience and visibility, but this did not eliminate their difficulties with context collapse. In the case of Facebook, all of my participants had knowingly accepted friend requests from family members, work colleagues, and other 'high risk' audience members and had the necessary technical skills to terminate these digital connections if they so desired, but did not. My interview data suggests one likely explanation: several of my participants (Colin, Gregory, Bee, and Ethan) positioned reciprocal following of social media accounts as an expectation among their offline network and reported that they felt it necessary to maintain at least one account where they allowed such connections. This reflects the blurry distinction between 'offline' and 'online' in my participants' construction of their relationships, with social media interactions positioned as a normal and expected aspect of 'offline' relationships and a complete lack of social media as unusual or even suspicious (Trottier, 2012).

Though unspoken, this expectation is at the centre of Bee's narrative in Extract 4.7, as evidenced by their acceptance of a dedicated business Twitter account as necessary if they wished to keep attending industry events. Though they frame the experience of being followed by a professional colleague during such an event as unexpected, this is due to their assumption that members of their offline professional network would not be able to find their Twitter account, not because the behaviour itself is in any way inappropriate or unusual. For Bee and the rest of my participants, discussions about context collapse were underpinned by the taken-for-granted assumption that it would be socially inappropriate to simply refuse requests to connect on social media from those in their offline life. Instead, constructing an online identity that catered to the expectations of their family members and colleagues was positioned as a necessary part of constructing their identity as a caring family member, a friendly and personable co-worker, or an enterprising professional, revealing how a refusal to adhere to normative expectations of online behaviour could constrain their offline identity construction. This mirrors previous research suggesting that young people often learn to anticipate surveillance from individuals such as parents and bosses and are increasingly responding to this by using dedicated accounts connected to their offline identity to field such requests for connection and construct an idealised, normative identity intended for these audiences (Duffy and Chan 2019). Additionally, this reveals how my participants' ability to control who has access to their online information was shaped not only by platform affordances, but by external social norms, further restricting their ability to 'opt-out' of certain kinds of online surveillance. In these cases, participants constructed models of their imagined audience not only based on how they may respond to participants' social media activity, but also how they might respond to a *lack* of it; they balance both the constraints of their expectations for how they will behave with the expectation that certain individuals in participants' offline network are entitled to a certain degree of access to the participant on social media. This necessitates a minimum degree of social media performance as part of the relationship.

7.2.2.3 Platform social norms

In the absence of these 'high risk' audiences, participants' perceptions of different platform-based social norms also played a significant role in shaping my participants' perceptions of their imagined audience. Despite struggling intensely with the constraints imposed by context collapse on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, three of my participants (Ethan, Gregory, and Lyra) reported feeling comparatively free in their construction of queer and trans identities when using public accounts in other social media contexts such as

Twitter or Reddit. This suggests that the diversity of my participants' actual potential audience did not necessarily predict the diversity of their *imagined* audience (Marwick, 2013). Instead, other factors appeared to be more influential, such as a platform's perceived social norms (Keller, 2019) or the behaviour of others in the participant's online network (Litt, 2012).

The influence of perceived platform social norms is most clearly illustrated by Ethan's construction of his Twitter audience in Extract 6.3. Ethan's comfort with using Twitter to express more stigmatised aspects of his identity, such as his neurodivergence, is attributed to his perception that 'everyone single person on that site is in some form probably a bit (.) mentally ill' and thus will likely share similar experiences to his own, even as his actual audience is unknown. This is also evident in the accounts shared by participants who had experienced unexpected context collapse due a mismatch between their imagined and actual audiences, such as in Chapter 4.3.3. Colin and Bee both shared narratives during interviews in which their initial perception of their Twitter audience as harmonious and aligned with their values was only disrupted by the discovery of specific, unwelcome observers that where otherwise known to these participants in their offline life.

Dienlin and Metzger (2016) suggest that participants' judgements about social media use are influenced by both the desire to reap maximum social benefits and the desire to avoid negative outcomes, and my analysis suggests that my participants' priorities shift in response to the presence of specific types of 'problem' audience members. Where my participants are unconcerned with these problem relationships, they tend to foreground a desire to form positive relationships with likeminded others, participate in online communities, or express themselves creatively. This is likely due to the relatively low risk posed by strangers on social media, whose ability to impose negative consequences on participants is limited and can usually be countered through online tools such as muting, blocking, and reporting. In contrast, the presence of 'high risk' audience members appears to shift participants' orientation towards avoiding negative consequences, likely due to these individuals' ability to impose more tangible social and even economic consequences (Pitcan, Marwick and boyd, 2018; Duffy and Chan, 2019) as well as the reduction in participants' ability to terminate contact in the event of a negative reaction. This reveals the extent to which my participants' employ different strategies in response to social surveillance where it is 'online-only' when compared to social surveillance that crosses the online-offline boundary, with these two groups forming distinct types of imagined audience that, in turn, influence my participants' identity construction in significantly diverging ways. Ultimately, the issue of power is central to every discussion of surveillance, and my own findings suggest that specific categories of 'high-risk' relationship dramatically increase the normalising impact of online social surveillance in a way that is salient to my participants.

7.2.3 Non-Human Audiences

Systems driven by machine learning, such as those responsible for social media content recommendation systems, are ever-changing and highly complex, presenting a unique challenge for social media users in terms of constructing an imagined audience. One might extrapolate information about one's human audience by paying attention to various interaction metrics, such as view counts, likes, and comments (Litt, 2012), and from observing the posts made by others to construct a model of a platform or community's norms. In the case of automated systems, these strategies fail. Such systems do not

generate equivalent digital traces to those of other social media users, and their fundamental inhumanity further disrupts the processes through which a user might construct their imagined human audience. However, as they are increasingly integrated into social media platforms and exert greater influence over user experience, my participants nevertheless worked to construct a model of these systems based on alternative information such as the advertising they were served and the posts that appeared on their feeds.

One shared aspect of my participants' relationship to automated surveillance systems was the linguistic construction of 'the algorithm' as a singular entity encompassing all the salient function of automated systems on a given social media platform (see Chapters 4.2.3-4.3.1). By constructing a singular and identifiable 'other' in this way, participants framed their interactions with 'the algorithm' within the context of a social relationship. As this construction was primarily influenced by the applications of automated systems most visible to my participants, most constructions of 'the algorithm' were based primarily upon the functions of each platform's content recommendation systems. In interview discussions, participants often assigned specific values to particular platforms based on the kinds of posts that typically became popular or fell foul of moderation systems, such as characterising TikTok and Instagram's algorithms as concerned with visual aesthetics or Twitter's as holding right-wing political beliefs. This construction of 'the algorithm' as an identifiable entity with distinct expectations allowed my participants to shape their identity construction accordingly to achieve their goals. For example, Ash adopted a 'cute' persona in their TikToks in order to get views (Extract 5.8) and Gregory reported avoiding specific terms in his tweets, including 'transgender', due to a belief that they may be suppressed by the algorithm.

Participants typically attributed the same primary social goal to 'the algorithm', namely that of encouraging users to spend longer on the site, which in turn shaped their interactions. Unlike participants' human audiences, participants' interactions with automated data-gathering systems are not limited to codified interaction types such as posts, likes, and comments. As such, knowledge of 'the algorithm' recontextualised participants' consumption practices, which might ordinarily be considered private and passive, as acts of identity construction within social interaction. This was particularly true with the platforms TikTok and YouTube, both video-based platforms known to use the time audiences spend watching videos to inform their recommendation systems (Roose, 2019; Smith, 2021). As this form of interaction is normally not shared with one's followers, practices which attempt to purposefully shape the outcomes of these recommendation systems, such as those discussed in Chapter 4.3.1, represent a form of identity work intended to be legible to 'the algorithm' (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022). In Bee's case (Extract 4.4), their awareness of TikTok's data collection systems, and the fact that social media companies often attempt to maximise engagement using posts that prompt strong negative emotions, recontextualises their viewing practices as explicit stancetaking. They make use of the tools available to them, in this case scrolling, to achieve specific social goals by positioning themself as someone who will not engage with 'rage bait'. While my participants construct their agency as partial in both the examples analysed in sections 4.2.3 and 4.3.1 through the use of the verb 'try' and foreground fear and vulnerability in their affective stancetaking, my analysis equally reveals how these participants respond in creative and considered ways to the unique challenges posed by automated surveillance.

However, while my participants did describe several ways in which they worked to shape their interactions with automated surveillance systems, they also overwhelmingly positioned

themselves as less equipped to meaningfully understand and engage with this aspect of their online audience. In contrast to participants' construction of expertise in managing their privacy when faced with surveillance from human audiences (see Chapter 4.2.1), no participant expressed an equivalent degree of confidence in managing how automated systems accessed, processed, or distributed their data. This lack of agency is reflected in my participants' use of metaphor, such as Colin's likening of automated surveillance to 'cosmic horror' (Extract 4.3) and Bee's description of TikTok's algorithm as 'a black hole' (Extract 4.4). Most of my participants expressed resignation and acceptance of the fact that they lacked the technical knowledge and tools required to track or limit these systems. This may be understood in terms of privacy fatigue (Choi, Park and Jung, 2018), a phenomenon in which individuals feel unable to keep up with the scale or complexity of privacy work and ultimately disengage. Approaching my participants' relationship with these systems using sociolinguistic analysis, however, revealed a complex and deeply emotional side to this disengagement; participants foregrounded the unavoidable and ubiquitous nature of automated surveillance and positioned themselves as entirely powerless, drawing on metaphors of the cosmic or supernatural to foreground the scale and incomprehensibility of these systems alongside a felt sense of vulnerability. While my participants do apply some similar strategies to constructing and relating to an imagined audience to account for automated systems, it is clear that this audience's fundamental lack of humanity is highly salient to participants and exposes weaknesses in the strategies participants have come to rely on for responding to different types of online surveillance.

7.2.4 RQ1 Summary

In answering my first research question, my analysis revealed that participants adopt a number of strategies in response to different types of digital surveillance. Interestingly, there was a clear distinction drawn between how my participants construct imagined audiences for general social media audiences and how they accounted for the presence of specific categories of 'high risk' audience members that blur the boundaries between online and offline relationships, particularly in the case of family and professional contacts. This aligns with existing research suggesting that these types of high-risk relationships may be particularly salient for social media users (boyd, 2014; Keller, 2019; Gorea, 2021), perhaps especially so for my participants, who face additional precarity due to their marginalised identities as transgender people (Pitcan, Marwick and boyd, 2018). In the case of automated surveillance, the imagined audience model remained largely applicable, with participants anthropomorphising 'the algorithm' in order to construct a meaningful social relationship with it, recontextualising formerly passive social media consumption practices as active interactions with 'the algorithm' and adapting their identity construction according to their perceptions of what the algorithm sees, desires, and understands. In addition to revealing the diverse and creative strategies my participants adopt in their responses to online surveillance, my analysis also demonstrates the complex role of social norms, both online and offline, in constraining their ability to evade and respond to online surveillance. This troubles the distinction between 'offline' and 'online' audiences and demonstrates the complexity of surveillance from hybrid audiences, as technology and social media become increasingly integrated into our everyday social and professional lives.

7.3 RQ2 – How does the social media context shape the identities constructed by my participants as transgender people?

7.3.1 Introduction

The kinds of identities an individual can construct in social interaction are constrained by the cultural and ideological frameworks that govern a particular context. This is not limited to how an audience may interpret an individual's identity, but also how an individual can come to understand and construct their own identity in a socially meaningful way. For this reason, individuals with non-normative identities may lack opportunities to acquire the knowledge and vocabulary necessary to conceptualise their identity as a social possibility if it is not represented in the social contexts they occupy (Schudson and van Anders, 2019); this renders them unable to advocate for themselves. All of my participants lived in the UK and came from similar cultural backgrounds where a binary model of gender was ideologically dominant, and all reported that they had not considered the possibility that they (or, in some cases, anyone at all) could be transgender prior to learning about transgender identities on social media. Connecting with other queer and trans people via social media was therefore positioned as a necessary step in the development of their transgender identity. This was particularly salient for participants who grew up in homes where explicit prejudice towards queer and trans identities was normalised, such as Bee and Blåhaj, but even participants who reported having supportive family environments positioned the adults in their life as insufficiently educated about transgender identity to adequately support them in exploring their transgender identities. Since positioning oneself as like and unlike others via adequation and distinction is a key part of how individuals construct their individual identities (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), identifying with an identity-based imagined community can be crucially important for constructing a socially legible identity.

Social media provides a means to connect with likeminded others beyond the limitations of geographic closeness and allows individuals across the globe to construct a sense of shared experience, identity, and community. This is especially important for minority groups who form only a small percentage of the population, with less populated areas perhaps unable to support regular in-person community gatherings. Its multimodal affordances have also given rise to unique ways of signalling community membership such as memes (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017; Denisova, 2019). A significant amount of media attention and research has focused on how this has facilitated the construction of group identities based on extreme political views, such as 'the manosphere' (see discussion in Chapter 2.11), and how this can facilitate radicalisation (Ging, 2019; Colley and Moore, 2022). However, while it is indeed worthwhile to study the risks posed by the rise of extremist groups and their co-option of such liberatory aesthetics to further regressive ideology, it is important to remember that the exact affordances that allow for the formation of such harmful online imagined communities also facilitate community-building that serves to further emancipatory aims. For my participants, connecting and identifying with an online imagined transgender community was positioned as a critical stage in the process of coming to understand their own identity, and their social media use revealed how indexing current and past membership to various online subcultures and imagined communities played a significant part in their construction of an authentic transgender identity in social media contexts. Furthermore, my participants were not merely interested in constructing a 'transgender' identity in a broad sense; they worked to position themselves as particular *types* of transgender people, drawing on social media memes and trends and shared online practices to construct nuanced, context-dependent transgender identities that indexed their values, interests, and history in a manner uniquely relevant to the social media context.

7.3.2 Fandom

Aligning with previous research (Jenzen, 2017; McInroy, 2020; McInroy, Zapcic and Beer, 2022), fandoms emerged as a major part of how my participants constructed their past and present online identities, both in their social media posts and interview narratives. Although several of my participants constructed online fan identities in the present day and often connected this with their construction of queer and trans identities, none of them positioned fandom participation as a general practice as part of their queer identity. Instead, participants identified one or two *specific* fandoms and positioned them as uniquely formative and connected not only to the development of their own queer identity, but also a 'typical' experience of queer identity development on social media. This idea is explored extensively in Chapter 5.2.3, illustrating how Ethan positioned his participation in the 'Dan and Phil' fandom on Instagram during his teen years as part of a normative shared experience for transgender people in his age group. Participation in the fandom for the BBC show *Sherlock* was positioned as a similarly shared queer experience by my participants Ash (see Chapter 5.3.3) and Gregory, whose Twitter username references the show. For these three participants, indexing (past) membership to these fandoms using memes, references, and merchandise became part of their construction of queer identity, constructing a shared queer experience by drawing on popular trends among queer users on sites like Tumblr and Instagram (Cho, 2018; Cavalcante, 2019; Keller, 2019).

As described by McInroy *et al*. (2022), online fandoms can function as a kind of online counterpublic, wherein marginalised individuals make use of social media platforms to gather together, construct solidarity, and develop counter-discourses against dominant norms. This aligns with the way my participants often foregrounded the significance of fan creativity, such as fanfiction and fanart, in their experience of online fandoms as queer-affirming communities. To use Ash's discussion of the *Sherlock* fandom in Extract 5.3 as an example, Ash refers to fans' 'queer interpretations' of the show, referring to analysis and creative works that recontextualised their partnership as an explicitly romantic one, known as 'shipping'. The practice and popularity of queer shipping in online conterpublics, following from the slash fiction communities that preceded current social media-based fandom (Berger, 2010), can create alternative norms that challenge heteronormativity and allow for positive representation and evaluation of queer relationships. This is also true of Ethan's experience with the Dan and Phil fandom, where the 'shipping' of Dan and Phil (known as 'Phan') was commonplace and rumours of a romantic relationship between the two queer men were positioned as cause for optimism and excitement as opposed to ridicule or shame (Dewi and Simanjuntak, 2017). Though it may seem frivolous, online communities in which queer shipping is embraced can create opportunities for queer and questioning members to explore alternatives to heteronormative relationships in a comparatively safe space and at a more impersonal distance through existing fictional characters (McInroy, 2020).

The positive value of online fandoms as queer-friendly communities that were not explicitly queer was articulated by several of my participants, such as Colin, Ash, Gregory, and Ethan, who all reported such online communities being pivotal in their early queer identity development. This reputation also illuminates my participants' use of experiences with such queer-friendly fandoms to index queer identity. Though not every fan of *Sherlock* or Dan and Phil will have been queer, indexing membership to these fandoms worked to index a particular stance towards queerness and heteronormativity in the eyes of my participants, signalling that they hold specific values that run counter to dominant cisheteronormative ideology. While my participants typically positioned these values as somewhat juvenile and naive in hindsight, as indexed by the affectionate yet condescending tone taken by both Ash

and Ethan when describing their past selves (see Chapter 5.2.3 and 5.3.3), the very association between these values and the largely teenage demographic of these fandoms serves to construct an authentic queer and progressive identity by drawing on a constructed shared experience that my now-older participants can position themselves as having grown from.

7.3.3 'Queer' Social Media Use

Though such fandoms may have historically gathered on dedicated forums or websites (Berger 2010), my participants' fandom narratives centred social media platforms such as Tumblr and Instagram. Considering this, my participants' choice to draw on markers of fandom membership to construct authentic queer and trans identities aligns with a broader pattern that emerged from my data, namely the positioning of particular social media practices as part of participants' construction of shared queer and trans identity and experience. Participants often constructed a shared 'queer norm' of social media use, which they contrasted with perceived dominant norms of social media, such as those represented by Ethan in his description of Instagram in Extract 4.5 and Ash in their positioning of Facebook as a 'straight' social media site in Extract 4.6. Naturally, the use of particular references based in certain social media in-group practices is not limited to the construction of queer identity and can be seen in Lyra's construction of a 'gamer' identity (see Chapter 5.3.3). In this way, different social media practices can, in themselves, be used to position oneself as different kinds of people (Keller 2019; Madianou and Miller 2013; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). This can be seen in my participants' use of memes, with the examples explored in Chapter 5.3 revealing how they made use of memes to index familiarity with current trends in pop culture and social media humour while also taking trans-positive stances. In the tweet shown in Figure 5.11, for example, Colin shares a meme in which the caption implies that transmasculine people are sexually desirable using the term 'he/they pussy', drawing on the format most commonly used in digital pronoun sharing (King and Crowley, 2024). Rather than a specific identity label, the meme draws on an aspect of how certain types of transmasculine identity are represented and communicated on social media and therefore constructs a collective 'he/they' identity that relies upon knowledge of queer social media norms to be meaningful.

A similar kind of 'queer norm' of social media identity construction can also be seen in my participants' use of conventionalised post types, such as Gregory and Ethan's engagement with dominant post types in the 'transition content' genre (see Chapter 5.2.3) and Lyra and Gregory's 'pride selfies' (Chapter 5.2.2). In my interview discussion with Lyra (Extract 5.1), she drew an explicit connection between the way she had seen other queer social media users incorporate face-paint in the colours of a pride flag into their construction of proud queer identity and her own use of this visual signifier, demonstrating the conscious ways that participants drew connections between multimodal signifiers and the shared repertoires of particular online (imagined) communities. In this way, my participants constructed not only their own queer identities, but *collective* queer identities, based on both symbols and shared experiences that index a more dominant construction of queer identity, such as Pride, and smaller, community-level practices such as those associated with fandoms. In both cases, participants appeal to a shared understanding of queer and trans identities that is rooted in social media practices and representations and employ these in their own social identity construction.

7.3.4 Multimodality

The multimodal aspect of social media was highlighted by my participants in our discussions, particularly when it came to direct visual self-representation. All of my participants posted at least one selfie during the observation period, and Gregory regularly created videos on TikTok and Instagram where he filmed himself in a 'talking head' vlog style. Participants frequently made use of visual signifiers to construct their queer or trans identities, either more overtly through the sharing of Pride selfies (Figures 5.3 and 5.4) and direct depictions of gender transition (discussed in both Chapter 5.2.3 and 6.4) or more implicitly, such as Ash's focus on sharing outfits that blend masculine and feminine signifiers and experimenting with queer cultural practices such as drag (see Chapter 4.3.2).

Though the increasingly visual focus of many social media platforms was positioned as problematic or constraining for some participants owing to the dominance of particular norms regarding acceptable body types, grooming, and fashion, others, such as Gregory, framed it as facilitating identity construction in important ways. Gregory, who posted to mark events such as Trans Day of Visibility and stressed the importance of representing diverse body types (see Chapter 6.4), stated in interviews that the ability to make his identity as a gay, trans, and disabled man visible, in a literal sense, was especially important to him due to the erasure of non-normative queer and trans bodies both on- and offline. Beyond making oneself literally visible to a wider audience than would be possible offline, Blåhaj also foregrounded the role of social media affordances in granting her greater agency over how others perceive her by giving her control over how and when she is visible. As explored in Chapter 6.2.1, Blåhaj suggests that developing the skills required to manipulate camera angles and lighting to produce self-portraits she judged to be 'arguably (.) cis-like enough' that others would be unlikely to recognise her as trans allowed her to overcome internal barriers that prevented her from fully embracing her preferred gender presentation in offline life. These two examples in particular demonstrate how social media can offer both important tools for trans people seeking to overcome the erasure of non-normative bodies in pursuit of social changeand a very personal opportunity to explore and express one's gender identity in a comparatively safe way. This latter function is particularly important given the prevalence of media discourses and 'debates' around the inclusion of transgender people in gendered spaces and public life more broadly that position trans people, and particularly trans women, as a disguised threat, subjecting them to increased scrutiny regarding their appearance (Jones and Slater, 2020).

7.3.5 Experimenting with Transgender Identity

Finally, my participants made use of social media to facilitate identity experimentation in such a way as to challenge transnormative understandings of transgender identity. As discussed in Chapter 2.4, transnormativity largely depends upon an essentialist construction of gender, understanding gender identity as innate, fixed, and relying upon the construction of fundamental differences between men and women (Johnson 2016). This idea is exemplified by the dominant 'born in the wrong body' narrative (Jacobsen et al 2022; Johnson 2015; Sutherland 2023), which upholds a binary, essentialist construction of gender identity as separated into two distinct categories, unchanging from birth, and tied to sexed bodies. In this view, an authentic transgender narrative is one in which gender non-conformity is present from birth and forms a linear breadcrumb trail towards the eventual discovery of one's transgender identity (Johnson 2016), leaving little room for

experimentation or choice on the part of transgender individuals. This framing of transgender identity as something fixed to be 'discovered' implies there is an obvious, pre-existing answer to questions such as 'what pronouns should I use?'. However, this was not always the case for my participants. Two of my participants, Bee and Lyra, reported joining Discord servers intended for those questioning their gender as part of a phase of identity exploration prior to coming out. In these servers, identity experimentation was facilitated through the creation of specific channels (similar to themed chatrooms) where users could request other members talk about them using various pronouns, names, and identity terms. Though I was unable to include any data from these servers themselves (see 3.4.2), both participants' narratives positioned these servers as a useful tool, framing such a period of indecision about one's gender identity as common and unremarkable. This resists the transnormative expectation that transgender people should 'just know' they are different from birth and find their 'true self' in a moment of discovery and instead foregrounds trans people's agency in experimenting and making choices. This is enabled by the affordances of Discord, allowing participants to connect with strangers in relative anonymity and with minimal risk of exposure. These affordances also facilitated other forms of transgender organising, such as the DIY HRT Discord servers described by Blåhaj in Extract 6.7.

Although the use of social media is often praised for giving transgender people a voice and facilitating public-facing awareness raising and activist campaigns, these examples reveal the importance of social media technologies in facilitating relatively private, protected online communities of practice. This *lack* of public visibility creates space for trans people to engage in more marginalised transgender identity construction, challenging dominant medicalised and transnormative constructions of transgender identity and provide peer-to-peer support. This may be particularly true for DIY servers such as those Blåhaj participated in, as DIY HRT itself often exists in a legal grey area that makes it vulnerable to censorship (August-Rae, Baker and Buzzanell, 2024) despite the material benefits Blåhaj experienced as a result of this collaborative generation and distribution of knowledge and resources. These more stigmatised community practices and ways of constructing transgender identity may not have been recognised as legitimate possibilities by my participants were it not for the more secretive nature of these private servers, but my analysis reveals how it allowed my participants to construct agentive identities, subverting the authority of medical institutions and instead positioning themselves as experts on their own identity and needs. This demonstrates the important role played by online (imagined) communities of practice in way my participants constructed their identities as authentic, empowered transgender people in their interactions with me in addition to their online identity construction.

7.3.4 RQ2 Summary

All of my participants reported feeling that transgender and particularly nonbinary identities were absent or insufficiently represented in mainstream media throughout their youth and positioned social media as an essential means through which they were able to encounter and learn about diverse gender identities and expression. For my participants, access to an imagined community of transgender people granted by social media was positioned as the most significant contributor to their ability to develop an understanding of their own transgender identity. The importance of community, particularly a sense of community with other transgender people, was prevalent across both my participants' social media and interview data, colouring their past narratives and shaping their present experiences. My participants drew on both mainstream constructions of queer and transgender identity as

well as more specific, contextually relevant queer identities that were not always initially apparent to an outside observer, weaving their identities as social media users into their wider identity construction in complex ways. My analysis thus demonstrates the diverse and nuanced ways that social media has redefined marginalised community membership and allowed for the construction of new identities and the collective construction of what it means to be transgender in defiance of oppressive norms and systems.

7.4 RQ3: How does participants' online identity construction interact with their offline identity construction – how is it enabled and constrained?

7.4.1 Introduction

In this section, I explore how my participants constructed the relationship between their 'offline' and 'online' selves, particularly in terms of their construction of transgender identities. At the outset of this question, I wish to highlight that complexity and perhaps impossibility of drawing a clear divide between the 'offline' and 'online' social world; what constitutes 'offline' and 'online' is often a matter of constructing this separation in a way that is most useful for a specific interactional purpose. In my research, participants' offline and online social lives supported and fed into each other, with relationships moving between online and offline, and online posts often explicitly referencing participants' offline activities. Whilst escaping the constraints of offline social contexts was a salient motivating factor for my participants' use of social media, none of them reported a desire to do this by severing the connections between their offline and online identities entirely. Instead, participants overwhelmingly positioned social media as valuable precisely for its ability to extend and supplement their identity construction beyond was afforded in much of their offline lives.

It is important to note that all of my participants wished to be open about their transgender identity. This may be a result of the context of this research and how I recruited participants. Participants were required to provide identifiable information such as their name and date of birth for the purposes of consent forms in order to participate, making it impossible to participate entirely anonymously. Considering this, potential participants who wished to keep their transgender identity private would perhaps have been deterred from participating research that would require outing themselves, at least to the researcher. Additionally, as discussed in Chapter 3.4.3, the searchability of social media posts posed a risk that participants could later be identified using public social media posts reproduced in published research, which I highlighted to potential participants. Following this, several respondents declined to participate, often citing specific risks associated with exposure. This process revealed that research such as my own may filter out transgender people who experience specific forms of precarity that may be exacerbated by exposure, such as those who are increased risk of violence (e.g. sex workers) or those who are stealth for fear of reactionary backlash if their transgender identity was exposed (e.g. childcare workers). Even prior to beginning the study, these experiences brought into sharp relief the impact and potential consequences that could come from unwelcome connections between one's online and offline identity.

Though all of my participants expressed a desire to be open about their transgender identity online, they too had to consider similar threats to their offline safety and employment. As such, this desire was not realised for all of my participants in all online contexts, which I will discuss in the following section.

7.4.2 Obscuring Transgender Identity Online

Although two of my participants, Blåhaj and Bee, did choose to obscure their transgender identity in some or all online social contexts, neither positioned this as desirable or empowering. This is perhaps most clear in the case of Bee, who chose to remain closeted on several of their social media accounts. As evidenced in Extract 4.7, it is precisely due to the challenges of entirely separating one's offline and online identity that Bee felt unable to express their transgender identity openly and publicly online, demonstrating how the integration of digital technologies into broader social life can bring with it the same constraints participants experienced offline. Within the same extract, Bee highlights their use of social media to construct a queer identity and express queer desire, something they have continued to do since moving to a private account. In Bee's retelling of these events, it is taken for granted that expressing themself in this way is important and remains attractive despite having exposed them to social and economic risks, while obscuring their transgender identity is an unfortunate but necessary requirement of their professional role.

Blåhaj's case, however, appears initially much less clear. Blåhaj's decision to be stealth on her public social media accounts could be viewed as a decision to shed a stigmatised aspect of her offline identity in order to construct an online identity free of the associated stigma and constraints, and for many transgender people this may be a desirable strategy (Marciano 2014). Although Blåhaj characterises her use of technology to manipulate her visual presentation as empowering, she does not extend this to her stealth identity construction as whole. Instead, Blåhaj positions herself as constrained by her own insecurities and a sense of responsibility to and 'present a good view for all the cis people' of not only herself, but the whole transgender community (see Chapter 6.2.1), reflecting the pressure commonly felt by visible members of marginalised communities to be 'good representation' (Chib, Nguyen and Lin, 2021). Being stealth is framed as a protective strategy focused not only on managing her public image as an individual, but on responding to the marginalisation faced by a broader imagined community of transgender people. These examples challenge the idea that marginalised individuals would necessarily feel empowered by the potential to obscure their marginalised identities online that was often touted in by optimistic early internet theorists (Turkle, 1995; Nakamura, 2000). Instead, all of my participants who were not universally open about their transgender identity in all on- and offline social contexts chose to use social media to express aspects of their transgender identity that they felt unable to in offline life, even, as with Blåhaj, this did not always involve being openly transgender.

The idea that individuals could simply hide their transgender identity online to avoid marginalisation itself also relies upon the assumption that one's gender adheres to the dominant gender binary. From a linguistic perspective, the use of different third-person pronouns based on gender further encourages speakers to make assumptions about another's gender in order to speak about them; the use of the neutral 'they', whilst natural to many speakers, is increasingly understood as indexing a specific political stance in the context of backlash against transgender rights (King and Crowley, 2024). Even in online contexts where it may not be possible to infer information from cues related to the physical body, individuals typically assume other users are male or female based on their language use (Herring, 1993, 1996, 1999, 2003). Considering these norms, it would be impossible for my nonbinary participants who use neutral, shifting, or context-dependent pronouns to obscure their transgender identity without inadvertently constructing a binary gender identity in the eyes of most uninformed audience members and accepting that they will be

misgendered. This is reflected in my own analysis of participants' profiles; even where participants do not state that they are nonbinary, I have considered the inclusion of they/them or multiple pronoun sets as indexing their nonbinary identity. While it is likely that my participants intended for this to be the case, it demonstrates how the social meaning of these practices is informed by broader trends in culture and politics that are not limited to specific local or online contexts but instead transcend such borders and complicate the separation between 'online' and 'offline'.

7.4.3 Indexing Transness: Offline vs. Online

When considering how my participants indexed trans identity online and offline, it is worth noting that social media platforms offer affordances for transgender identity construction that are not available in offline social contexts. As discussed in Chapter 5.2.1, my participants took advantage of these in a variety of ways, with one example being making use of online profile fields, such as account 'bios', location fields, or specific pronoun fields to display their pronouns. In offline social interaction, pronouns are typically assumed based on gender presentation and physical cues, while explicitly stating one's pronouns is a marked practice and potentially face threatening to both the speaker and their interlocutor. In contrast, while the promise of the 'disembodied' online self may never have been realised, social media users have a greater degree of agency over their self-presentation when constructing a social media profile than they might in face-to-face interactions, particularly when it comes to the physical traits typically used to determine one's gender (Turkle 1995). Not only can users be selective about the kinds of images they share of themselves (see Chapter 6.2.1), but some of my participants chose to use alternative profile images, such as album covers, character images, or other artwork, to index their interests while not sharing their likeness. This, combined with the prominence of pronoun sharing in one's display name or profile header, alters the salience of the various social cues used to make judgements about an individual's identity when compared to offline social contexts, increasing the prominence and visibility of participants' deliberate self-identification in such a way as to facilitate the expression of transgender and nonbinary identities.

However, while this was true of most of the platforms my participants preferred to use, not all social media platforms operate in the same way. For example, TikTok de-emphasises profiles in favour of a decontextualised, algorithmically governed 'For You' feed which, as discussed in Chapter 5.4.2., places greater emphasis on user's physical embodiment. User expression is restricted to videos, and the platform affordances encourage an emphasis on recording the self, providing features intended to be used with forward-facing selfie such as AI face filters. Although TikTok does allow for users to create profiles and share pronouns, the endlessly-scrolling feed and foregrounding of algorithmic curation over following individual users mean that viewing a user's profile disrupts the optimised viewing experience and is thus discouraged by the platform's affordances (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022). As this style of social media interaction grows more popular, having been embraced by other social media platforms through additions such as YouTube Shorts and Instagram Reels, it is unclear whether social media trends are moving towards a style of content delivery that is overall less friendly to the online pronoun-sharing practices my participants had universally embraced.

7.4.4 Relationships between 'offline' and 'online' selves

The ways in which participants positioned themselves online in relation to their offline identity construction was a notable aspect of the observational data. For example, Chapter 6.3 explored how my participants Ash and Bee recontextualised aspects of their offline identity construction in social media narratives to reclaim agency and authenticate their transgender identity in response to offline experiences of misgendering. The practice of composing these narratives in 'real time', as in the example taken from Bee's Twitter account, was fairly common among my participants, particularly in offline social contexts such as the workplace where participants' identity construction was particularly constrained. The portability afforded by smartphone technology enables this practice of 'parallel' socialising (Tagg and Lyons, 2020), positioning participants' social media accounts as a form a digital 'backstage' (Goffman, 1986) in which they could expose the artifice of their offline identity construction to an online audience while simultaneously maintaining its appearance of authenticity to an offline audience. As explored with the examples from Ash and Bee, this can facilitate resistance even where participants express a lack of agency in their narratives, by allowing participants to challenge dominant assumptions and position themselves as authentically trans.

These posts, and posts like them, demonstrate how my participants can use social media to construct community and solidarity, recontextualising negative experiences as normative, and part of a collective, authentic transgender experience. In the interviews, participants often highlighted the importance of this 'venting' about the struggles they faced as transgender people as a way to bolster their own resilience through seeking solidarity and support from their community (McInroy, 2020), either their friends or a like-minded imagined audience, while limiting the risk of rejection associated with contacting individual members of their support system directly. Though I did not collect replies to participant posts made by non-participants, I observed that such tweets often elicited empathetic responses and back-and-forth interactions similar to those observed by Jones (2023) in her analysis of discussions within an offline support group for trans youth. This reveals how participants' online community can function similarly as a support system. In practice, there was significant overlap between many of my participants' offline friendship network and their online audience on their most used social media accounts. This was particularly true for participants such as Ash, Colin, Bee, and Lyra, who primarily used smaller, private social media accounts, although participants such as Ethan and Gregory also engaged in similar venting behaviour. While the support offered by online communities may be more limited than that of strong offline communities (Cavalcante, 2016, 2019), my participants demonstrate that such a delineation cannot always be clearly drawn, and that the presence of 'online' communities may be strongly felt in my participants' offline lives.

While my study set out to focus specifically on transgender people, several of my participants experienced marginalisation across multiple axes that further shaped their use of social media. The most notable of these in my data was the intersection between transgender identity and disability and/or neurodivergence. Although I did not ask about neurodivergence explicitly, four of my seven participants identified as neurodivergent and made this relevant in their identity construction during interviews, which speaks to the impact of this intersection on their experiences using social media. This was particularly true of Ethan, who had experienced severe bullying due to his neurodivergence and transgender identity that disrupted his ability to access mainstream education. As explored in Chapter 6.2.2, Ethan frames social success in his offline life as contingent on his ability to construct a neurotypical identity, while also positioning expression of his transness and neurodivergence

as essential to his construction of an authentic identity – he is a 'husk' otherwise. The fact that Ethan draws a connection between his trans and neurodivergent identities here highlights the importance of viewing identity from an intersectional perspective. Neurodivergent people often face additional challenges in recognising and conforming to social norms but must do so if they wish to appear neurotypical and avoid the stigma associated with neurodivergence in a process known as 'masking' (Hall and Parish, 2024). For Ethan, backgrounding his transgender identity and masking his neurodivergence are experienced together as part of a larger goal of suppressing non-conformity in order to avoid harassment and maintain employment, constraining his identity construction. By foregrounding the importance of social media, particularly Twitter, in facilitating his construction of both a transgender and neurodivergent identity, he positions social media as necessary for his authentic identity expression.

The same is true for Gregory, who contextualised an interview narrative about how social media had allowed him to express his trans identity by adding that 'I definitely think it was helpful for me to express like <u>any</u> identity' in reference to the isolation he experienced as a disabled wheelchair user living in a rural area with few accessible opportunities to socialise outside of his home. These participants do not draw a distinction between their 'online' and 'offline' identity construction but rather characterise their offline identity construction as sufficiently constrained as to no longer qualify as the construction of an 'identity' at all. In Ethan's case, his 'offline' identity is denaturalised to such a degree that it is characterised more as the construction of a *non*-identity, while Gregory suggests his social isolation precluded even the construction of more normative identities. Though the barriers faced by Ethan and Gregory were especially prominent, similar narratives were echoed by other participants identifying as neurodivergent or otherwise isolated due to experiences of abuse and/or bullying, positioning social media as an essential route through which they were able to overcome negative circumstances and construct the communities required to fulfil their social goals.

These examples highlight a recurring pattern wherein participants positioned their online identity construction as, at least in part, a direct response to the constraints they encountered most frequently in their offline lives. While this was occasionally made more explicit, such as in the way Bee and Ash reaffirmed their authentic transgender identities in social media narratives about offline identity trouble, the use of social media to reclaim agency was a persistent theme across all of my participants' narratives. Six of my seven participants shared personal narratives of offline harassment, abuse, and violence to illustrate the risks they faced as transgender (and often multiply marginalised) individuals in many of the offline contexts they navigated on a day-to-day basis, foregrounding the impossibility of authentic identity construction in the face of such vulnerability. These narratives of relative powerlessness, however, were often also used to reinforce participants' positioning of social media as a significant, sometimes life-saving alternative, aligning with previous research exploring trans people's experiences with social media (Austin *et al.*, 2020; Kichler, 2021). For my participants, the significant contrasts between their constructions of their 'offline' and 'online' identities in interviews often served not to emphasise the separation between their offline and online *selves*, but to construct a relationship between them wherein their construction of authentically trans, queer, disabled, and neurodivergent identities positions them as wholly agentive despite their everyday, offline vulnerability.

7.4.5 Interviews as ‘offline’ contexts

In exploring the relationship between my participants’ offline and online identity construction, it is also important to reflect on the relationship between participants’ social media data and interview data. Although my interviews took place via online video conferencing software, participants typically positioned their identity construction during interviews as more akin to ‘offline’ identity construction, contrasting it to their ‘online’ identity construction in their social media posts. This is likely due to the affordances of video conferencing software allowing for a ‘face-to-face’ style of synchronous verbal communication more similar to a typical in-person conversation than the styles of asynchronous posting and text-based instant messaging that my participants tended to associate with ‘online communication’. For this reason, participants’ identity construction in interviews is best recognised as ‘offline’ identity construction for the purposes of this discussion to reflect the equation of ‘online identity construction’ with specifically ‘social media identity construction’ in terms of how my participants oriented towards them. In my research, my analysis of participants’ relationships between their offline and online identity construction is largely based upon how they construct this relationship in their interviews, including their constructions of offline identity both within the context of the interview and in narratives about situations outside of it. The majority of my analysis concerns offline contexts that participants chose to make relevant, particularly those in which they spent a significant amount of time or felt to be especially constraining. It is also likely that the offline contexts my participants chose to foreground in their discussions of their offline identity construction were influenced by the fact I had specifically recruited them based on their transgender identity; this anchored our conversations (at least initially) in comparisons concerning how they expressed their transgender identities, specifically, in different offline and online contexts, even when I did not explicitly ask about gender identity in my interview questions.

At times, the partialness of my participants’ constructions of a generalised ‘offline’ identity was made explicit, such as in Ethan’s acknowledgment of the fact that his construction of his typical offline ‘everyday’ self was likely in conflict with my impressions of him from our interactions in Extract 6.2. However, as identity itself it understood to be inherently partial, dynamic, and context-bound (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), I do not consider this to be a weakness of my study. In our discussions during interviews, particularly during the stimulated recall task, my participants constructed their identities with explicit reference to the identities they had constructed previously or within different contexts, establishing a complex web of relationships between their identity construction across various offline and online contexts as well as in the present moment. This allowed me unique insight into what technical and social factors were most salient to them when constructing and contrasting their ‘offline’ and ‘online’ identity construction. While it was clear that their offline and online identity construction overlapped and intertwined such as to be inseparable from one another, my participants generally relied upon adequation and distinction when constructing a generalised model of their ‘offline’ and ‘online’ selves. This included backgrounding similarities through speaking minimally about offline contexts in which their identity construction was comparatively unconstrained (e.g. private social gatherings with friends) in favour of more restrictive settings such as work or school. This process brings to the fore the most relevant and salient contrasts between my participants’ offline and online identity construction, while also revealing areas where this distinction is troubled, such as in the case of professional networks extending into online contexts. For this reason, interviews were a valuable inclusion in my methodological approach, allowing me to gain greater insights into

how different online and offline contexts interacted in my participants' broader social lives in ways that would not have been possible otherwise.

In the following section, I discuss my methodological approach more broadly and consider the benefits and potential limitations of this style of participant-focused, discourse-centred social media research.

7.5 Methodology

7.5.1 Introduction

In this section, I will review my methodological approach, highlighting the ways in which a discourse-centred approach was particularly effective in answering my research questions as well as some of the limitations of my methodology. I first discuss my approach to interviews, reflecting on my decision to perform interviews online as well as my positionality as an 'insider' researcher. I then highlight the challenges of collecting social media data and discuss my exclusion of data from the social media platform Discord despite its popularity among my participants, discussing both the ethical and practical obstacles to collecting such data and how these might be mitigated or overcome in future work. I then take a closer look at my participants in terms of sample size and diversity and how this may have influenced my findings. Finally, I discuss the decision to approach my research questions through the lens of linguistics specifically, arguing for the centrality of this discourse-centred approach in supporting and contextualising my findings.

7.5.2 Observation and Interview Reflections

Due to the length of the research period and the relatively unobtrusive way in which I was able to collect participants' social media data (see Chapter 3.4), I had to be sensitive to the possibility that participants may not be conscious of the fact that I was in their audience at any given time. I did not interact with participants' posts during my observation, so my presence in their audience was largely invisible. At several points during the stimulated recall tasks, participants indicated that they had forgotten that they had made a particular post or that I would see it, so I felt it necessary to reaffirm that they consented to the inclusion of posts we discussed. Participants were also encouraged to review the posts I had collected and, ultimately, no participants requested that I remove any of their posts from my dataset. While my approach to data collection did warrant this additional care, my ability to blend into my participants' usual social media audience was also a major strength of this style of observation when it came to answering my research questions. In seeking to analyse my participants' social media identity construction, it benefitted both myself and my participants to reduce my impact on their everyday social media use. This approach minimised the disruption caused by participating in my study for participants, while also maximising the degree to which my data represented my participants' typical social media practices.

In terms of interviews, clear and intentional communication was also necessary to ensure that I was balancing my desire to construct a professional researcher identity with my responsibility to ensure a positive and affirming experience for participants. For example, participants often sought reassurance and emotional connection when sharing experiences of vulnerability, particularly where these were directly related to our shared trans identity, such as struggling to access gender-affirming care, struggles with body image, and social and emotional challenges caused by their transgender identity. During such discussions, they frequently asked directly if I had experienced similar things. In these cases, I felt it was

necessary to respond to my participants' emotional needs in a more personal way. Although interviewers have historically been expected to remain neutral and maintain emotional distance from their participants, I felt it would be inappropriate in these cases to do so as I did not want participants to feel as though I were rejecting them or their vulnerable disclosures (Shaw *et al.*, 2020). In some cases, I chose to offer explicit sympathy, support, or share similar experiences, straying from the more minimal responses I typically relied upon as an interviewer. Although this did further contribute to the possible blurring of boundaries between my roles as a researcher and a peer, I recognise that interactional roles are dynamic and believe my choice to connect emotionally with my participants enhanced my research. Participants may not have been so open in their interviews with me if they did not feel that I would be able to empathise and that they could do so without judgement or rejection. Though there is a risk that connecting emotionally with participants could result in them sharing things more than they otherwise intended to in a research context (Shaw, 2011), this can be addressed using the safeguards discussed in Chapter 3.5.2 (e.g. allowing participants to review transcripts and redact portions).

Finally, as a transgender person myself, I felt particularly conscious of the frequency with which trans people are made to feel responsible for educating cisgender people about their experiences, in ways that can be exhausting and alienating (Barbee and Schrock, 2019), and how my position of power as a researcher had the potential to recreate this effect. As such, I avoided asking for further clarification when participants assumed shared knowledge of fundamental concepts related to transgender identity, such as gender dysphoria, various aspects of social and medical transition, or common identity terms such as 'transmasculine/transfeminine' or 'genderfluid', even where these may not necessarily be common knowledge among a broader cisgender audience.

7.5.3 Social Media Data and Access Limitations

One limitation I felt acutely throughout my research was my inability to include data from Discord servers. For many of my participants, Discord was the primary social media they used to keep up with friends, engage with their hobbies and interests, and connect with queer and trans communities, both locally and globally. This was most salient when working with Bee, Lyra, and Blåhaj, who all positioned Discord as central to their engagement with online queer communities. For Lyra and Blåhaj, who used Discord more than any other social media platform, this meant that I was unable to represent a significant portion (or, in Blåhaj's case, the majority) of their social media use in my dataset. Because of this, it was necessary to rely more heavily on second-hand narratives about their experiences and the communities in which they engaged. Unfortunately, as discussed in Chapter 3.4.1, I was unable to include data from Discord due to the practical and ethical barriers associated with collecting such complex data and obtaining the necessary consent from all involved parties. However, the absence of this data limited the degree to which I could truly explore my participants' social media use across platforms. This highlights a key consideration when conducting social media research brought about by the rapid development of social media technologies. What is understood to be 'social media' is not static and this definition only broadens with the emergence of new social media technologies, challenging existing ethical frameworks and forcing researchers to develop new strategies for accessing and analysing different types of social media data.

While I was unable to include Discord data in the present study, I believe such data may be fruitfully explored in future research via a more ethnographic approach, which would allow for greater integration into these communities and thus for relationship- and trust-building to occur on a community level, rather than focusing on a single individual. Similarly, such an approach would be better suited logistically as it would not require the burden of collecting voice channel data to be placed on the participant. Instead, the researcher could simply record interactions for which they are present as a participant, and use Discord's tools, such as server nicknames, to clearly mark their role as a researcher in a way that would be less achievable for a participant who is an existing member of a community. It was apparent to me that Discord servers were an important means for transgender community-building, organising, and even amateur research (see Chapter 6.4), offering additional protections against trolling and other forms of online harassment by offering increased privacy and the opportunity for community moderator to remove problematic members. For this reason, I believe Discord servers may be a valuable site for future research.

7.5.4 Sample Size and Diversity

A further limitation of my study was its sample size and diversity (see discussion in Chapter 3.2.3–3.2.4). My methodology offered a framework for analysing my participants' individual experience and identity construction in great depth, which proved especially effective when working with social media data and considering the ways my participants' social media practices were deeply embedded in other aspects of their social lives (Tagg and Lyons 2020). However, the sheer volume of data and labour required to explore these topics in a contextualised way and develop the required relationships with my participants leaves very limited room for pursuing such a study with a large sample size. In my case, this was further limited by my status as a single PhD researcher working within a limited timeframe.

Though I did not seek to provide generalisable answers to my research questions, it is nevertheless worth considering that such small sample sizes are particularly vulnerable to issues of diversity. In my case, while my sample was weighted towards those who identified as transmasculine, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to work with participants with a range of transgender identities, encompassing transfemininity, transmasculinity, various nonbinary identities, and participants at varying stages in their gender transitions. In terms of sexuality, most of my participants simply identified as 'queer' or declined to label their sexuality. Despite my small sample size, I was also able to capture a range of experiences in terms of class background and education. My participants were relatively evenly split between those who identified as working class and those who identified as middle class and had a wide range of educational experiences despite their proximity in age: two participants held undergraduate degrees, two were due to begin university in the following academic year, one was pursuing a postgraduate qualification, and the remaining two participants had not pursued post-compulsory education and did not plan to in the future. My participants were also roughly evenly split between participants who lived independently and those who lived with their family, which was particularly significant for my research given the younger age of my participants. This did end up being relevant to my analysis, as the experiences of sharing homes with family members shaped how certain participants, such as Gregory (see Chapter 4.2.1), constructed the benefits of social media use and the challenges of context collapse.

My sample also provided the opportunity to explore the ways that the intersections between my participants' various marginalised identities shaped their identity construction. This was most apparent in my analysis when it came to class and economic precarity (see Chapter 4.3.3), neurodivergence (Chapter 6.2.2), and physical disability (Chapter 6.4), highlighting the individuality of my participants' experiences and the intersections between their different identities. However, my sample was overwhelmingly white, with all but one of my participants identifying as such, and my final mixed-race participant stressing that he identified as 'white-passing' and did not feel that his experience is representative of most people of colour in the UK. As a result, while at times I was able to analyse the intersection between race and transgender identity in terms of a participant's whiteness (see Chapter 6.3), the intersection between transgender identity and racially minoritised identities is largely absent in the current study and one which warrants further exploration in the future. Additionally, as discussed earlier in this chapter, participation in studies such as my own may not be accessible to transgender people who are at greater risk of identity exposure, which can often be exacerbated by multiple marginalisation. Nevertheless, that I was able to explore such intersections at all speaks to the unique advantages of adopting such a small-scale, qualitative approach, allowing for me to approach participants as individuals and acknowledge the complexity of their intersecting identities rather than risk flattening this nuance into a single, universal 'transgender' experience. It was evident in my research that my participants felt these intersections were relevant to their motivations for using social media (see Section 7.4.1) and shaped their strategies for constructing their identities as transgender people, both online and offline. This highlights the diversity of transgender experiences, a point critical to achieving transgender liberation for all transgender people, particularly those outside a wealthy, white, abled ideal.

7.5.5 Methodology Summary

While this study is certainly valuable in revealing commonalities between my transgender participants' experience with social media, it also demonstrates that there is no single 'transgender' experience *of* social media, nor in any other realm of life. This is not just due to the variation in gender identity among my participants, but a constellation of other personal and social factors unique to each individual. For this research, I aimed to focus my attention on 'everyday' social media users rather than popular transgender creators with an existing following. Prior research has been effective in exploring how transgender creators, particularly YouTubers, make use of social media to construct their identities as specifically transgender influencers through videos sharing their narratives, documenting their transitions, and commenting or offering advice on issues related to trans identity. This research has provided important insights into issues such as the role of transnormativity in vlogger transition narratives (Jones, 2019) and how trans vloggers construct expertise (Dame, 2013), much of which was echoed in my own research. However, the social goals of transgender influencers likely do not align with those of most transgender social media users for whom social media use is less directly interwoven with economic success. This is particularly significant given the common focus in pro-social media discourse on the notion of allowing for greater visibility of marginalised groups and giving them 'a voice'.

Among my participants, only one, Gregory, was concerned with constructing a public-facing activist identity and explicitly using social media to amplify a political message. While this does not diminish the value of social media's ability to democratise access to an audience, my research reveals the complexity of this issue. Indeed, many of my participants claimed

that social media *did* allow them to have 'a voice'. My research instead suggests that my participants felt social media gave them a chance to express themselves not just as transgender people, but as transgender *individuals*, taking advantage of the varied affordances of different social media platforms to achieve the goal of expressing aspects of themselves they felt unable to in their everyday offline social contexts. While my participants did use this to 'vent' and seek support for negative experiences (see Chapter 6.3), they also embraced social media as a means to express trans joy in various forms, such as celebrating trans identity (Chapter 5.2.2), embracing playfulness in their gender expression (Chapter 4.3.2), and finding comfort in normatively gendered interests (Chapter 6.2.1), revealing another valuable yet often overlooked aspect of empowering transgender individuals.

Finally, in returning to the goal of transgender liberation, I feel the sociocultural linguistic approach was particularly effective in exploring my participants' experiences with social media in a way sensitive to the complex ways that social power enables and constrains my participants' identity construction. This approach allows for nuanced discussion of how my participants construct their own agency and the norms that inform and constrain their identity construction, providing insight into my participants' own understanding of the partialness of their identity construction and the different social factors influencing it in different contexts. Discourse is the medium through which individuals come to understand the social world and is the only way through which internal perceptions and understandings of the self can be brought into social reality. Through discourse, one's identity can be negotiated in relation to other socially recognised identity positions and made meaningful in interaction. For this reason, discourse is uniquely effective in exploring how individuals make sense of themselves and their experiences, and Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) sociocultural approach, particularly the tactics of intersubjectivity, allows for analysis of how participants construct their own identities and those of others through the lens of shifting, contextual relationships between identities. This relationship focus is not limited to relationships between specific individuals and groups, but also how participants construct their own relationships to a normative ideal, both in terms of broader culture, within their communities, and in relation to the 'imagined centre' of relevant imagined communities (Winer, 2022). This approach allows for sensitivity to my participants' own constructions of the possibilities available to them in terms of identity construction in different contexts, complicating the idea of 'transgender' as a homogenous group with shared needs and challenges and revealing how my participants foreground and background different aspects of what it means to be transgender depending on the social context.

7.6 Implications

My research shows how transgender people can make creative use of social media affordances to construct trans identities. It also shows how these identities are informed and intertwined with their offline experience in complex and nuanced ways.

Unfortunately, however, all of my participants reported feeling that their preferred social media platforms were becoming increasingly hostile to queer and trans people, and this trend appears to have only accelerated in the years since. As detailed in Chapter 4.2, a number of my participants already felt compelled to implement protective strategies, both technical and behavioural, in an attempt to insulate themselves from the harms caused by constant exposure to hateful rhetoric on their social media feeds, and several reported this problem worsening between our first and second interviews in early and mid-2023. This was

particularly true of Twitter, with all of participants expressing anxieties about their ability to continue using the platform long-term following its purchase by Elon Musk in late 2022. Musk's acquisition and subsequent rebranding of Twitter as 'X' marked the beginning of a relentless rollback of restrictions targeting transphobic abuse and harassment. Under the guise of promoting 'free speech', X has loosened restrictions on deadnaming and misgendering trans people (GLAAD, 2023) while imposing new constraints on trans people's ability to discuss their experiences through Musk's redefininition of 'cis' and 'cisgender' as slurs under Twitter's Terms of Use (Elon Musk [@elonmusk], 2023); this has led to the visibility of posts using these terms being limited in accordance with the same Hateful Conduct policy that no longer adequately protects transgender users.

While Twitter was the focus of much of my participants' concern during my observation, other platforms have followed suit in the intervening years. Meta, parent company to Facebook, Instagram, and new platform Threads, recently announced sweeping changes to its content moderation policies, claiming that tools intended to combat misinformation and hate speech were harmful to 'legitimate political speech and debate' (Kaplan, 2025). These changes explicitly exclude queer and trans people from protections against certain types of hate speech, with the policy stating that '[Meta-owned platforms] do allow allegations of mental illness or abnormality when based on gender or sexual orientation, given political and religious discourse about transgenderism and homosexuality' (Meta, 2025). While the policy changes implemented by these social media platforms claim to promote free speech and open discussion, it is clear that these changes do not seek to address a genuine imbalance in the perspectives and voices represented on social media. Rather, these changes represent an attempt to shift the norms of these online social contexts from the top down, tweaking their moderation systems to suppress any challenges to the unmarked status of the cisgender majority and cement the 'abnormality' of queer and trans users.

Regrettably, discussions about the harms that can be caused by poor social media moderation and exposure to online prejudice often risk obscuring the many benefits of social media use, framing social media itself as inherently harmful. Australia's recent move to ban social media access for users under sixteen years old is positioned as a response to poor youth mental health (Albanese and Rowland, 2024), though restricting access to social media entirely arguably risks doing more harm than good. Human rights organisation Amnesty International is among those who have criticised this decision, highlighting the importance of social media in allowing young people to express themselves online and arguing that '[r]emoving the benefits that social media brings will not achieve the government's objective of improving young people's lives, and ignores the fact that the harms extend beyond children and young people to marginalized people and groups' (Amnesty International, 2024). My research stands as a testament to these benefits. Though my participants faced a number of challenges during their everyday social media use, social media was universally positioned as a source of empowerment, education, and connection. Although my participants were young adults, all reported using social media prior to turning sixteen, and their historical narratives often foregrounded the role of social media in allowing them to experiment and express themselves in a safe environment. Ultimately, restricting access to social media in response to the harms caused by hateful rhetoric does little to combat the prejudice at the problem's heart, instead serving to further suppress the voices of marginalised individuals and groups who have the most to gain from finding each other online.

Additionally, I feel it is important to draw connections between attempts to restrict young people's access to social media and other conservative attempts to restrict young people's autonomy and access to informational resources, some of which are more clearly intertwined with the struggle for trans liberation. For example, recent rhetoric and legislation pushing to outlaw education about LGBT+ identities in schools or ban the use of puberty blockers by young trans people explicitly seek to uphold cisheteronormative ideology but also rely on the unspoken assumption that sacrificing young people's autonomy and access to information is necessary in order to address potential risks to their wellbeing. Taken together with the growing tolerance for online hate discussed above, it is unclear whether the largely positive, affirming, and empowering experiences with social media reported by my participants will be available to trans youth in the near future without strong opposition.

My research demonstrates the value of social media in allowing my trans participants to construct their identities in both the past and present, as well as its significance in allowing them to experiment in relative privacy and safety. I believe the best way to further trans liberation is to provide robust support for trans people, particularly trans youth, in their use of social media. One aspect of this, which goes beyond social media, must be challenging the idea that the rights and validity of transgender people are uniquely subject to 'debate' (McLean, 2021; Montiel-McCann, 2023) and recognising the importance of challenging online hate speech in the name of upholding the values of "free speech" (Ging, 2019). To ensure that trans people may continue to safely use social media in the coming years, it is essential that action is taken to reverse the trend of normalising transphobic rhetoric on popular social media platforms. However, this normalisation is legitimised by mainstream political and media discourse positioning the recognition of transgender identities as a matter of moral and medical uncertainty. It need not be reiterated that such a framing is not supported by evidence, but the frequency with which this narrative is repeated by those in positions of political power has allowed for the aforementioned policy changes which hinge upon 'transgender' no longer being viewed as a legitimate marginalised identity worthy of protection. Unfortunately, in this regard, preserving trans people's ability to safely use social media is not an isolated issue, but aligns more broadly with the wider goals of fighting for justice for transgender people across all areas of life.

Where trans young people's social media use is concerned, specifically, I believe it would be beneficial for support to be made available to transgender young people regarding social media use that specifically addresses their needs. Although efforts to educate young people on internet privacy are well-intentioned, this is typically limited to fearmongering about 'stranger danger' (Barbovschi *et al.*, 2012) or how careless social media posting could harm a future career (Duffy and Chan, 2019). Arguably, emphasising the negative impacts of social media use, much like abstinence-only sex education, is not sufficient to address the concerns of any young social media users as it does not acknowledge the reasons why young people might seek to engage in 'risky' online behaviour in the first place. As my research has demonstrated, transgender social media users often position social media as necessary to authentic identity expression while simultaneously facing greater and more complex risks associated with unwanted identity exposure. It is important, then, for those supporting transgender young people to be knowledgeable about social media and able to support them in using it to achieve their social goals and avoiding online harms. My research suggests that social media can be particularly valuable for transgender young adults who already experience increased vulnerability due to intersecting marginalised identities, social isolation, or exposure to transphobia in offline contexts, and who may also be less able to

seek support from peers or caregivers. Providing support in addressing concerns about social media use and advising on social media safety from an informed and accepting perspective could be instrumental in empowering young trans people to access information, social support, and a means of self-expression capably and confidently.

7.7 Conclusion

This thesis has examined how transgender social media users construct their identities and navigate the unique challenges of online surveillance from diverse human and non-human audiences. While my transgender participants' experiences were varied and individual, they were also unified in the critical role that social media played in allowing them to construct positive, agentive identities as transgender people. My analysis further highlighted the complexity of responding to online surveillance, revealing both the sophisticated strategies that can be employed to mitigate context collapse and the nuanced relationships users construct between themselves and their audiences, both online and offline. In explicitly considering the relationship between participants' offline and online social lives, my findings contextualise their online identity construction within the broader context of their online lives, allowing for unique insights into how their experiences of marginalisation and their construction of positive, resistant identities crossed the 'online-offline' boundary and informed one another. The findings of this thesis demonstrate the creativity, adaptability, and complex social practices of young trans people as they navigate constructing a transgender identity across modes in an increasingly hostile political climate. The research highlights the importance of social media contexts as sites for resistance, community-building, and positive expression, and the need to ensure that such opportunities are not eroded in light of an increasingly centralised, corporate, and conservative social media landscape.

As a contribution to the field of sociocultural linguistics, I hope that this study provides compelling evidence for the flexibility of this approach when seeking to answer complex questions. This research challenges the divisions drawn between textual and multimodal analysis, demonstrating that the principles of sociocultural linguistics apply to acts of identity construction beyond those which might be considered 'linguistic' in the traditional sense. In the multimodal realm of social media, it becomes impossible to meaningfully separate 'linguistic' from 'non-linguistic' data. As linguists, this can be daunting. However, throughout this project, I observed how my participants approach new and complex social media technologies with curiosity and creativity, often using features in unexpected ways to construct and communicate their unique identities and experiences. It is only appropriate that linguists should approach our analysis of these social media practices and the changing role of language in our everyday communication in a similarly experimental and open-minded way. In taking an explicitly polymedia approach, this thesis makes a significant contribution to linguistic scholarship by foregrounding participants' strategic use of various social media technologies to achieve different social goals. Further, this research highlights the degree to which social media technologies are integrated into participants' everyday social lives, demonstrating the interdependence of participants' 'online' and 'offline' identity construction and problematising the distinction between them.

Throughout the thesis, I have also taken care to highlight my reflexive approach. This felt especially necessary given the nature of this study, both in working with transgender participants and also conducting research that involved gaining maintaining relationships with said participants across several months. At times, I was joining an online audience that was otherwise restricted to only a handful of a participants' closest friends, and I was mindful

of the responsibility that came with such intimate access. I have focused so extensively on my efforts to empower my participants and conduct myself responsibly in my relationships with them because I believe that such insights are no less valuable as a contribution to future scholarship than the results of my analysis. As with the rest of methodology, I found flexibility and transparency to be key in establishing trust and maintaining my relationships with participants, foregrounding my participants' agency and individuality in both my analysis and my interactions with them as a researcher. Reflexivity is also central to trans linguistic study, though I feel it is important to stress that this is no less true for researchers who are themselves trans. As a transgender researcher working with trans participants, it was often necessary to balance my role as a researcher with participants' attempts to connect with me as a peer, someone who shared similar experiences, or even a 'trans elder' mentor figure. My commitment to critical awareness and examination of my own positionality also demanded challenging, often uncomfortable reckoning with more personal challenges and biases of my own, such how my personal experiences with gender dysphoria, transition, and gender-affirming care and how I understand my own transgender identity might influence my analysis. Rather than shying away from this, I believe that remaining reflexive at every stage across planning, conducting, and communicating research is critical in striving towards ethical research practice that may be mutually enriching for both researcher and participant. Additionally, in critically examining our own preconceptions and biases, reflexivity offers an opportunity to engage more deeply with the ideological goals of queer and trans linguistics, to which this thesis as a whole is ultimately in service.

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Appendix 1

Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Negotiating trans identities: A discourse analysis of young adults' identity construction on social media

Researcher: Gabriel Jackson – aexgj@nottingham.ac.uk

☐ **Yes**	☐ **No**	I confirm that the purpose of the study has been explained and that I have understood it
☐ **Yes**	☐ **No**	I have had the opportunity to ask questions and they have been successfully answered
☐ **Yes**	☐ **No**	I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason and without consequence
☐ **Yes**	☐ **No**	I understand that there are no known risks or hazards associated with participating in this study
☐ **Yes**	☐ **No**	I confirm that I have read and understood the above information and that I agree to participate in this study
☐ **Yes**	☐ **No**	I confirm that I am over 16 years of age

Please indicate whether or not you would prefer to participate anonymously:

☐ **Yes**	☐ **No**	I consent to my data being transcribed and wish to be referred to anonymously in all written forms of dissemination
☐ **Yes**	☐ **No**	I consent to my data being transcribed and wish to be identified by name/username in written forms of dissemination

Participant Name	Date	Participant Signature

Researcher Name	Date	Researcher Signature

Appendix 2

Transcription Conventions

-	self-interruption or false start
(.)	pause of less than one second
(1)	timed pause (seconds)
.	end of intonation unit; falling intonation
?	end of intonation unit; rising intonation
:	lengthening of sound
@@	laughter
underline	emphatic stress
[ ]	overlapping speech
[…]	some data removed from transcript

Adapted from Jefferson (2004)

Appendix 3

Appendix 3a: Interview Schedule (Interview 1)

This interview was semi-structured and flexible. I explained to participants that I would initially start with a list of pre-written questions, but they were welcome to volunteer anything related that they thought I might find useful or interesting at any time. I also explained that I would be taking notes throughout their answers to both help my transcription and to take note of anything I wanted to follow up later. I let participants know that they would be given the opportunity at the end to bring up any additional topics they would like to talk about that I had not asked about in a more open-ended way.

The following questions were used as a guide and structured the first portion of the interview:

1. **Can you introduce yourself?**

2. **How would you describe your gender identity in your own words? What are your pronouns?**

3. **What does a typical day look like for you in terms of your internet and social media use? How would you describe your typical online 'daily routine'?**

    - **Prompt:** Throughout the day, what apps do you typically use and when? What do you go to those apps for?

    - **Follow up:** I noticed that you use more than one social networking app or account on a daily basis – do you use them all for the same thing, or different?

4. **Are there any other social media platforms that aren't part of your 'everyday' use but that you still use or have an account on?**

    - **Follow up *(if yes)*:** If these sites aren't part of your everyday routine, do you use them or go to them for something specific?

5. **How many social media accounts do you have in total?**

    - **Follow up:** Do you use this accounts for different things?

    - **Follow up:** Why do you have more than one account on [platform]?

6. **Do you use your real name online?**

   - **Follow up:** Is this the same everywhere? Why/Why not?

   - **Follow up:** Do you have an ‘online name’, or do you make a new username for every account?

7. **Do you think you present yourself the same way online that you do offline? Why, or why not?**

8. **Do you present yourself differently on different social media platforms or accounts? Why/Why not?**

   - **Follow up:** Do you think the different ways you present yourself are all equally true to how you see yourself?

   - **Follow up:** In your opinion, are different online spaces better suited to expressing different aspects of yourself?

9. **To what extent are you open about being transgender on social media?**

   - **Follow up:** What about in your offline life? Are there any differences between how open you are online and offline? Why/Why not?

   - **Follow up:** Do you think the internet has come with any particular benefits or challenges for you as a trans person?

   - **Follow up:** Have you experienced negativity towards yourself as a trans person online, or towards trans people in general?

10. **When you post on social media, how much do you tend to think about who might see your posts?**

    Follow up: Is this the same for all your accounts? Why, or why not?

Follow up: Do you do anything specific to try to make sure your posts reach the audience you want to see them, or to make sure they aren't seen by people they aren't intended for?

11. How important is privacy to you?

- **Follow up:** How familiar are you with the different privacy settings on the social media platforms you use?

- **Follow up:** Do you take any other specific steps to protect your privacy?

12. Do you ever consider algorithms or any other automated processes when you are using social media?

- **Follow up:** What kinds of automated systems are you most familiar with/aware of?

- **Follow up:** When apps request additional information for use in their algorithms, like access to the contacts on your phone, do you approve this?

Appendix 3b: Interview Schedule (Interview 2)

As this interview was both semi-structured and based around a stimulated recall task using participant social media data, it cannot be represented with a typical interview guide. Instead, I have provided the following questions as illustrative examples of how I might discuss different themes and types of social media posts with participants.

Context: General Information – Participants were asked to provide information that would aid in my analysis, such as explanations of references, information on my participants' own interpretation of different memes etc., and additional contextual information relevant to posts.

- Can you explain what this is/means?
- Is this a common meme format? How have you seen others use it?
- Can you expand on the situation you're posting about?

Context: Participant Intentions – Participants were asked to reflect on their intentions when making a post to help contextualise their posting behaviour.

- What motivated you to share this?
- How did you feel when you made this post?

- What did you like about this meme/format?

Audience – participants were asked to reflect on their imagined audience.

- When you made this post, who did you think might see it? Were you thinking of anyone in particular?
- Why did you make this post on this account, rather than any of your others?

Self-presentation - Participants were asked to reflect on how they present themselves across contexts, how intentional any variation is, and how this aligns with their goals when using different social media platforms.

- I noticed you only shared posts like this one on [account], is there a reason for that?
- *[comparing posts from different accounts]* These two posts are about the same event. Why did you choose to make two different posts rather than sharing the same one on both accounts?

Multimodal Features – Participants were asked explicitly about their use of multimodal features such as emoji, selfies, and videos.

- I noticed you use these emoji often. What is about them you like?
- I haven't used this emoji used like this before. What does it represent to you?
- You post a lot of selfies like this one on [account]. What does that mean to you? Why do you choose this account to share them?
- Why did you choose to use lip-syncing in this video?

Language Features: Participants were asked about their language use in posts, particularly where this varied across accounts and/or used non-standard language.

- You don't use any capital letters in your posts on [account], is there a reason you prefer to type like that?
- Why have you censored this particular word?
- Why did you choose to word this in this way?