Spring 2023

Definitions and Discourses: An Analysis of Queer Identity Construction on Social Media

Gil Nehemya Bloch Messer
Bard College

Definitions and Discourses: An Analysis of Queer Identity Construction on Social Media

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by

Gil Messer

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2023

This work is dedicated to queer communities past, present, and future. May our identities serve to drive us towards liberation, and may we otherwise be unbounded by divisions and categories.

Acknowledgements:

Endless thanks to my advisor, Professor Allison McKim. You have taught me more than I can articulate, from my first semester at Bard until now. You have given me the tools and the passion to study sociology, and supported me dedicatedly throughout the process of this project. I could not have done this without you, and you have my boundless gratitude.

Thanks to my dean, Dorothy Albertini, without whom I would not have gotten a chance to do this project. Your support, encouragement, and accountability carried me through a period of time in which I was struggling severely enough to have nearly abandoned my college education. I am so glad I persevered, and I am grateful to you for ensuring that I could do so.

Thanks to Rabbi David Nelson, Rabbi Joshua Boettiger, Tatjana Myoko von Pritwittz und Gaffron, and the members of the Bard Jewish Student Organization and the Bard Sangha. You have all given me a warm and loving community, wise guidance, valuable mentorship, a true sense of belonging and spiritual fulfillment, and most importantly you have made Bard feel like home throughout my time in the institution.

Thanks to my partners, friends, family, communities, and compatriot Bard seniors, which include too many people to name. The seeds and roots for this project have been nurtured by all of my loved ones who helped facilitate my own questioning of queer identity that eventually led me here. There have been so many kind and enthusiastic people along the way who listened to me babble endlessly about my research, encouraged my interests, offered wonderful advice and profound insights, connected me to participants and resources, proofread through my syntactic errors, and sat with me in the library providing camaraderie through the long hours of arduous work. If you are reading this, you have likely helped me along this journey. Thank you so much.

Most importantly, thank you to everyone who participated in my research. You have my deepest gratitude, and I hope I have honored your time and the stories with which you have so kindly entrusted me. Without you this project would not exist, and it is as much yours as it is mine.

Table of Contents:

Introduction

Christine, who identifies as queer and loosely cisgender, is a 29 year old manager of an independent bookstore. She is deeply interconnected in publishing and literature centered communities, and has a specific interest in young adult fiction. She joined Tumblr when she was in college around 2010, mostly because she wanted to engage with fan-made content about a book series she liked at the time, and her group of friends were all active on the site as well. She had previously had plenty of exposure to queerness, grew up in a family open to such things, and knew plenty of queer people throughout her life, but had never considered herself queer until she read a Tumblr post that described asexuality. As Christine described it to me, the asexuality spectrum is a range of sexual identity labels regarding a lack of sexual attraction, either holistically or contextually. Suddenly, something clicked for her, and she realized that certain experiences and aspects of her life up until that point made sense as contextualized within the framework of asexuality. It was a watershed moment for her — she understood why it had made no sense when her friends went boy-crazy as teenagers. There was a word and a community for this thing that she felt but had not been able to describe up until that moment. Eventually, the vast majority of her college friend group came out as queer in some way, despite the fact that the majority of them identified as cisgender and heterosexual when they first met. She has spent much time discussing asexuality with people she knows and informing them of its vast array of possible meanings, and she joked that she has created more asexual people everywhere she's gone. Since her initial discovery, her understanding of gender and sexuality have become much more fluid, and she has gone through several sets of identity labels. She now identifies more loosely as queer, which she likes for its intentional vagueness and inability to be strictly defined, and as an acknowledgment of the fact that her sexuality is fluid and subject to change. Most of

her friends are queer, she engages specifically with queer people and issues in literary networks, and she seeks to bring greater awareness and exposure to queer media and creators. Her social media interactions are mostly with her friends and people she knows within literary networks and, similarly to her offline life, are mostly with other queer individuals, although she does not engage intentionally with broader online queer communities outside of her pre-existing social and professional circles. She described queerness as a sort of backdrop of her life, an almost incidental one which is never quite the main focus of her close relationships.

Moments of discovery and identity construction like Christine's are increasingly common among for queer people who came of age in the contemporary era: so many people, including several whom I interviewed, learned much of what they know about the meanings of queer identities from social media. In individuals for whom social media was present in and/or central to the exploratory stages of their queer identity, it provides information on the meanings of queerness and the facets of different identities and avenues for personal experimentation and identity work, processes by which individuals shape and develop their own identities (Robards et al 2020, Hanckel & Chandra 2021). A wide range of academic literature expounds upon the personal, communal, pedagogical, artistic, and political merits of social media for queer people, as well as its harms to a lesser extent (Hanckel & Morris 2014, Cavalcante 2019, Byron et al 2019), but fewer discussions within the extant literature regard the implications of social media on queer identity itself, and more specifically how queer identities shaped by social media differ from those which form in social contexts outside of it.

I interpret queer identity through a social constructionist framework as a personal and subjective practice based not in biological aspects of humanity but in social, cultural, and political circumstances that inform the creation of groups, categories, and concepts of self (Vance

1989 p. 163). Taking inspiration from queer theorists including Foucault (1978), D'Emilio (1993), and Butler (1999), I frame the construction of queer identity as a socioculturally mediated meaning-making process, influenced by factors both internal and external to queer communities, including discrimination within wider societies, culturally specific educational processes, communal bonds, labeling practices, and proliferation of language and terminology, among other things. If we understand queer identity construction to be dependent on the social processes by which queer communities create meanings, this prompts inquiry into how different forms of queer community engagement and the varied opportunities therein would have different effects on the outcomes of queer identity construction. To examine this issue, I conducted an interview study of 11 queer-identified individuals who came of age within the time period of widespread social media usage in order to elucidate how queer identity is constructed in online social contexts, and how young queer peoples' understandings of identity itself result, at least in part, from the proliferation of social media as central to queer communal engagement.

Early research of online queerness, with its penchant for the prefix "cyber," focused on the confluence of extant in-person queer communities and practices with networked technology, emphasized the blurred boundaries between online and offline social practices, as well as its ability to connect individuals and communities across long distances, and provide community support to those who lived outside of queer communal hubs (Wakeford 2002, Bryson 2005). A plethora of more contemporary research exists about networked technology and online spaces as critical sites of community engagement, education, and identity work for queer people. Much of this research affirms the importance of online social contexts as necessary and generative sites of education, describing the ways queer individuals use the affordances of different social media in order to engage in constructive identity work, enact authentic self-presentation, and disrupt

hegemonic labeling structures (Oakley 2016, Haimson et al 2020). However, this research largely stops short of interrogating the effects of social media on the meanings and functions of identity itself. Although online engagement plays a central role within many queer peoples' lives and experiences, the question remains: how has social media affected queer people's conception of identity? Much of the extant scholarship on the matter addresses the way queer people use the internet, including the ways in which community boundaries are negotiated and how individuals situate themselves in social contexts, but I believe more work is necessary to elucidate the changes that queer community being enacted online has precipitated, with subjective accounts of meaning-making regarding queer identity.

I posit that queer communities on social media are not only spaces for their users to encounter concepts of identity, but that the social processes within these communities focus predominantly on discussions of identity itself, identity functioning within them as the most salient aspect of selfhood and social connection. Within these communities, individuals learn about categories of identity and encounter specific definitions and socially sanctioned discourses regarding these identities, which are often conceptualized as descriptive of personal feelings and life experiences. The boundaries of trans identity, the definitions of bisexuality and pansexuality, and the validity of asexuality as a queer identity were among the many topics strictly sanctioned through discourse. These discourses introduced aspects of insecurity and cautiousness around the social complexity of label usage to my participants' processes of identity formation, though all of my participants were harshly critical of these discourses and personally disavowed criticisms of identity labels. They displayed a range in which they personally used specific or vaguely defined identities, and those who ascribed to labeling specificity still understood individuals' subjective experiences to be fluid despite the firmness of identity category boundaries themselves. This

research affirms the socially constructed nature of identity categories, and demonstrates that the ways in which online queer communities provide fruitful opportunities for identity construction, although the process is fraught with internal social sanctioning that hinders individuals' ability to freely and confidently explore the development of their identities.

Literature Review

My research is situated within several different areas of study, including the historical construction of queer identity, labeling theory, new media studies, and queer scholarship focused on mediated practices. The vast body of scholarship on queer history provides an understanding of queer identity not as fixed and static, but rather as socially embodied and historically mediated process, shaped by the medical and psychological system, capitalism and industrialization's effects on communal existence and subjective identity, and is presently shaped by various social and communal processes. Halperin (1993) described sexuality not as a biological fact that can be finitely understood, but rather as a culturally produced and historically developed process regarding the human body and interpretations thereof incorporated into ideological discourses. He described the role of antiquity in this historical understanding of sexuality, and reflected on the contemporary assumption in hindsight that throughout history, sexual behaviors reflected individuals' specific sexual identities. This notion of sexuality, which refers to specific and characteristic aspects of human personalities, is laden with ideological presumptions about the qualities of a person and demarcates within a particular sexual domain a vast number of qualities that had previously been conceptualized differently within aspects of social and personal life, and additionally generates the concept of sexual identity in which personal essence is defined, individuated, and categorized by sexuality (p. 417). D'Emilio (1993) posited that although

homosexual behavior has been observed throughout history, gay identity did not exist until the nineteenth century, when capitalist and industrialist shifts in American the social structure enabled the formation of affinity-based youth communities independent of the family structures that had been previously been the essential unit of production. The system of free wage labor that emerged within an urbanized capitalist market enabled large numbers of young people to live in cities, surviving on their own wages, forming new communities around shared interest in same-sex eroticism (p. 470). He sought to combat the myth of the 'eternal homosexual,' the idea that there have always been and will always be gay people, despite the usefulness of that myth to combat silencing in early gay liberation movements, and instead argued that gay identity is a relatively recent historical product (p. 468).

In addition to scholarship on the social construction of sexual identity and subjectivity, this research is situated within scholarship regarding identity construction in digital contexts. Early scholarship of the internet posed an interest in the effects of networked technologies on concepts of identity. Sherry Turkle (1999) offered foundational early insights into the effects of the internet on identity and the changes in socialization and possibilities for identity work posed by networked life. In her essay, "Cyberspace and Identity," she focused on the creation and performance of personae within virtual contexts. Within online contexts, individuals can self-describe using text, which grants the possibilities of flexibility and anonymity in the construction of virtual personae. Turkle argued that this enables people to explore different and often previously unexplored aspects of the self that would have been impossible in offline contexts, and for individuals to embody multiple different personae depending on the relevant context (p. 643). As an example, Turkle cited a man who self-described as nice and mild mannered, but presented himself online in certain contexts as an assertive "Katharine Hepburn

type" woman modeled after his mother. For Turkle, this represents the possibilities for exploration of previously un-explorable aspects of the self and embodied multiplicities of the self in virtual spaces (p. 645). Although this was not her focus, this example makes evident the possibilities that virtual identity work allows for the exploration of gender and sexuality, and the computer as an object grants individuals avenues towards fluid and multiple identities.

Bryson (2005) sought to understand the confluence of networked internet technologies and embodied social processes, meaning-making opportunities, and communal experiences of queer world-making. She described how some early literature regarding online queer spaces took a utopian approach, heralding a new age of queer interconnectivity that could transcend the boundaries, limitations, and marginalization that characterized pre-networked queer existence. Rather than falling into the pitfalls of new-media hype, she was interested in the material effects of the virtual on the existence of queerness. Drawing from Butler's (1993) understanding of queerness as a fluid and contextually dependent social process as opposed to being a distinct and finite ontological existence, she explored the confluence of networked technology with those social processes. She wrote:

> "virtually queer" marks the intersection between the performative and "in progress" qualities of queer culture and its manifestations and permutations engendered by networked digital technologies—construed as spaces and artifacts—as important mediative elements in the production of "queer." (Bryson 2005, p. 85)

She described how online spaces, such as queer chat rooms, functioned as virtual surrogates for the in-person contexts in which the social processes that mediate queer identity occur, such as gay bars and bookstores. Access to digital networked spaces is therefore particularly beneficial for individuals living in places without access to these resources.

A plethora of contemporary research exists regarding social media's role in providing young queer people with opportunities to explore queer communities and engage in formative identity work. Although much work has been devoted to analysis of queer peoples' usage of social media, it has been predominantly centered on how it provides opportunities for education, community support, identity work, how queer communities utilize the structural affordances of the sites themselves, and how the queer online social practices challenge or reinforce hegemonic narratives. These studies generally do not address the effects of social media usage on queer identity categories themselves. The existing scholarship generally frames social media as contexts integral to young queer individuals' education in queer subjects, access to queer communities, sites to engage in identity work, and to find role models. Robards et al (2020) discussed the significance of Tumblr (a blog-based social network) for queer people, seeking to understand why young queer people were so much more likely to use Tumblr than youths in the wider populations. Their study found that the significance of Tumblr for queer users manifests in their desire for connection and community, and as a site of education and exploration of matters regarding gender and sexuality. Queer communities on Tumblr provide users with an education in queer pedagogy, affording them learning experiences in language with which to express themselves and describe their experiences. This article describes how for its participants, Tumblr was where they first encountered definitions of the identities with which they self-describe, especially those who did not have access to such information through offline sources like family and school (p. 286). Tumblr also poses emotional challenges to its users, and this article reports that there were more instances of people leaving Tumblr than any other platform. Participants cite feelings of being overwhelmed and emotionally drained by the various discourses that happen within the community, often relating to the intensity with which topics of identity and

social justice are discussed and disputed (p. 288). Hanckel and Chandra (2021) studied Australian queer youths during COVID era restrictions and found that although they were often stuck at home because of pandemic restrictions, even though they had less access to in-person communities, they were still able to engage with queer communities online and through these engagements were able to have ample opportunities to explore and develop their identities (p. 8). Social media was crucial to these queer youths as a space for them to learn and engage with people in their cohort, but they also struggled with persistent problems of discrimination online and the fact that certain identities and intersections thereof are still either silenced or stigmatized online (p. 25). Oakley (2016) studied the way queer Tumblr users write the bio boxes and 'about me' pages on their blogs, and the various ways that gender and sexual identities are constructed through community generated and regulated labeling practices. Framing her study against the background of labeling theory and a Foucauldian understanding of discourse, Oakley demonstrated that users embraced the affordances of Tumblr's format encouraging countercultures and labeling through its system of tagging. Tumblr users have been involved in shaping public discourses regarding non-binary genders and sexual orientations through the public nature of their content, which has complicated hegemonic binary cis-heterosexual discourses of gender and sexuality. They construct identities through dissemination of information about themselves through their tags, bios, posts, and other content, and are concerned with authenticity and narratives of *true self.* She defined "*true self* and nonbinary gender and sexual orientation labeling as forms of identity construction that allows LGBTQIA identifying individuals a method for nuanced descriptions of feelings and desires. However, far from perfect, these labeling practices are also grounded in hegemonic female/male, feminine/masculine binary discourse." (p. 1).

Extant scholarship on the subject of queer identity and social media describes the ways in which queer people use the structure of social media for communal belonging, identity work, and exploration of self-presentation. This scholarship explicates the ways in which queer people use the specific structural affordances of social media, including the opportunities granted for authentic self-presentation, social meaning-making practices, and interaction with like-minded individuals. This body of writing largely does not address the characteristics of how identity itself functions on social media, the implications of specifically online communities that are organized around identities and the social sanctioning processes regarding identity boundaries that exist therein. Additionally, there is a dearth of scholarship that addresses specifically how individuals personally interpret concepts of identity found on social media. My research interrogates the concepts of identity that individuals encounter on social media, their interpreted meanings, and how the social processes of identity construction in online contexts affect the way individuals understand their own identities.

Methods

My research seeks to identify patterns precipitated by social media in the ways people understand their own identities and the processes by which they were constructed. For my research, I conducted in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with queer or LGBTQ+ identified individuals about their identities, formative experiences, education about queer subjects, involvement in queer communities, and social media usage. Eligibility for participation in my research was broad, in that any person over 18 years old who identifies as queer or LGBTQ+ could participate. Conveniently, I sidestepped the always messy question of who counts as queer (which some of my participants discussed as a point of contention they have

encountered within queer communities), and the issue of having to create a working definition of 'queer' for this project, because I was interested in the way individuals self-identify, and in studying variations in the meanings of queer identity along certain sets of experiences. Hence, participants needed to meet no criteria other than personally and subjectively considering themselves queer or LGBTQ+. A complication with language which I have encountered is that some of my participants would not self-describe as queer, either because of the relative newness of queer as a reclaimed identity or umbrella term by members of the community, or because they still consider it a slur. For convenience and expediency, I refer to the overarching group I study in this paper as the queer community, and in broad strokes I will refer in this paper to my participants as queer because of the accepted academic usage of that word, and because of queer studies and queer theory as disciplines with which this work is in conversation. However, the fact that queer is not universally accepted or used as a personal or group identity within my participants is noteworthy and provides useful information about generational changes in identity proliferation.

I completed 16 interviews over the course of my research, although I only ended up using 11 of them substantively because of the limitations I encountered in my sampling that prevented me from being able to do a direct cross-generational comparative study between people who grew up in the age of social media's widespread usage and those who did before it, as I had originally intended. This proved impossible because of sampling bias towards trans and gender nonconforming younger individuals that stemmed from the personal networks to which I had access. The five participants I interviewed who came of age before the widespread usage of social media were all cisgender and identified as gay or lesbians. One of them was a 42 year old gay Latino man, the only cisgender man I interviewed, and the other four were white cisgender

women identified as gay or lesbian ranging from ages 67 to 76. Because of the fact that all of the older cohort identified as cisgender and gay or lesbian, I could not directly compare their identities and processes of identity construction with my younger participants, because there were no direct commonalities in the gender and sexual identities between the two cohorts. Further research, in which a more representative sample would be taken from both online and offline era cohorts, would be able to compare more directly between the experiences of those who use similar identities but developed in different social contexts.

Although my main cohort of 11 participants had a range of experiences online and a variety in the role that social media played in their queer identity construction, for brevity's sake I will refer to them henceforth as the online-era cohort. The online-era cohort ranged between 18 and 29 years old, though nine of those participants were between 21 and 25, with the mode (n=5) being 22, with the 18 and 29 year olds being outliers. I recruited all of my participants using snowball sampling, though I also posted calls for research participants on social media (Instagram and Twitter). All of my participants were either people who I already personally knew, or who knew people who I knew and were informed of my study by people in my social circles. As such, my sample was non-representative of wider queer populations. Although my method of recruitment was not random, it was the best way for me to find participants on the scale of time and resources to which I had access, given the limited nature of my research. Recruiting among networks that skew younger and more active on social media was a relatively simple matter, given that I was able to tap into my own networks and have access to a wide range of people for whom I knew personally that they both have life experiences relevant to my project, and would be willing to participate in an interview about the subject.

My online-era cohort participants share several characteristics which make them a valuable group to study, despite occupying a range of identities and experiences. All of them are either college educated or currently in the process of obtaining their bachelor's degree, and most of them came from middle class economic backgrounds. Eight of the online-era cohort are white, three of whom are Jewish, one is Black, one is Bengali, and one is Black and white biracial. All are American except for one from the United Kingdom, and they come from a range of backgrounds with regards to whether or not queer people, identity, or community were present or accepted within their family, early life, and adolescent contexts, though this range does not correlate to racial or economic background. Some of the online-era cohort had a majority of their early formative queer experiences on social media with very little offline interaction with queer people or communities, and some had only cursory online experiences that they did not describe as central to their development of their identity, and cited offline people, communities, and experiences as most relevant to their development. Most of the online-era cohort had significant formative experiences with offline queer communities in the form of friend groups, family members, teachers, and scholastic institutions such as high school Gay Straight Alliances, but online communities and information were central to the development of their understandings of queer identities and more specifically about the meanings of identity labels.

The one factor that unites all participants in the online-era cohort is that they all currently or have in the past identified with identity label categories that are commonly discussed in online queer communities, the definitions of which are subject to significant variations in meaning and are often hotly disputed within online discourses. Each participant in the online-era cohort has at least at one point identified as one or more of the labels of queer, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, nonbinary, genderqueer, or trans, all of which are notably disputed — either in their meaning,

who has the right to identify as such, or whether those who claim these identities are valid members of the queer community. With regard to gender identity, only one of them identified as cisgender, though she described that she only identifies as such loosely. The rest are in some way nonbinary, genderqueer, or trans. The sexual and romantic identities of my online cohort are mostly bisexual, pansexual, asexual, or queer, with only two identifying specifically as gay (both of whom are transgender), and none of the participants identifying as straight. As such, given the complexity of these identity categories and the variation with which these categories are socially mediated for people within the age range of the online cohort, this research can help elucidate information about the experiences of those whose identity development was done in social contexts internal to their queer communities that were concerned specifically with the boundaries and meanings of identity labels and categories, which personally affected them and their perception of how identity functions.

I chose in-depth qualitative interviews as my research method because of my specific interest in peoples' conception of their own identities, and of narratives of variation regarding its construction. Interviews are the only method in which I am able to collect detailed narratives of my participants' formative experiences, experiences with queer community and social media, and their personal understandings of the role identity plays in their lives as queer individuals. Other methods, such as surveys, could grant valuable information on the differences in the specific terminology people use for their identities, and perhaps could reveal correlations between age or experience on social media with certain identifiers. However, they could not reveal nuanced subjective information about individuals' understandings of their own identities. Content analysis of social media posts, even specifically posts related to topics of queer identity, might elucidate certain aspects of the influence of social media on queer identity, but similarly

could never provide subjective accounts of people's experiences interacting with that content. My interview questions focused on several areas of information, firstly being my participants' identities, processes by which they came to understand their identities, and their relationship with personal identity as a whole. For example, a subset of my interview questions regard my participants' thoughts on other peoples' usage of identity labels, including if they have seen people use certain identity labels differently than they do, or in ways they disagree with, and if they have ever been told their usage of certain labels is wrong or inappropriate. Questions such as these sought to elucidate my participants' understandings of the meaning of queer identity, their understandings of how labels function, and what sorts of conflicts they have experienced along the boundaries of identity. I asked about formative queer experiences, awareness of queer identity in their early life, who were the people relevant to their early queer education, and various questions about what they learned about queerness and their own identity through early experiences and interactions. I asked various questions about my participants' social media usage, how it has evolved over the years, how they interact with other queer people using social media, if they have had experiences on social media that have shaped their queer subjectivity, and their experiences of queer community and conflict on it. I also asked about engagement with queer community in general, about involvement with queer activism, and conflict they have experienced.

I chose this research topic because of its personal relevance in my life and identity, and because I would have direct and easy access to networks of people and groups from which I could recruit participants. I personally identify as queer, nonbinary, and bisexual, and the internet was instrumental in my formative education about queer identity. I was exposed from a young age to queer people through several of my parents' friends and members of our local Jewish

community, and distinctly remember a school presentation in sixth grade on the spectrums of gender identity, sexual orientation, and romantic attraction. I started to encounter queer content on Tumblr by age twelve through the various fandom communities in which I engaged, and much of the information I was able to access about queer identities and experiences during my adolescence came in the form of Tumblr posts, as well as from my queer friends who were also all Tumblr users. I began identifying as bisexual when I was 15, the realization spurred on in part by my affinity and attraction for a certain queer character from the British science fiction show Doctor Who (who was often labeled as pansexual by fans), and informed via Tumblr about the nuanced and oft-debated definitions of bisexuality, as opposed to pansexuality and other possibly relevant identity labels. I knew about the existence of queer Tumblr discourses regarding the boundaries, contested validity, and usage of certain terminology, and I was always uncomfortable with these disputes over identity categories, but I took for granted the idea that the queer community was comprised of various specific sub-identities each with a distinct (but sometimes contested) definition. Throughout middle school, high school, and college, my social life has primarily centered around other queer individuals and groups, and I have had romantic relationships with people of various gender identities. As I got older I stopped using Tumblr, only because I stopped having time for it when I got to college, and I began to study gender and sexuality as a sociology student. My understanding of queer history, gender and sexuality as a sociopolitical system intertwined with networks of power, and intersectionality all deepened, as did my queer interpersonal relationships. The more I studied queerness academically and the more I engaged in person with queer communities untethered to online discourses, the more I began to question what I knew of queerness from my days entrenched in Tumblr (and eventually my own relationship to gender). I began to wonder how queerness as formed online is different

from queerness enacted in offline contexts, and eventually that line of inquiry brought me to this project. I knew that the question of queer identity construction online was relevant for so many people in my life who were grappling with similar questions. Throughout this process, when I have told people in my own social circles that I am researching queer identity construction and social media, they have typically remarked that it's a relevant topic, either to them personally or more generally.

Online Queer Communities, Learning, and Boundary-Making

Within queer communities online, concepts of identity itself are a central topic of discussion, parsing its meanings and figuring out individuals' relationships to identity occupying central social importance. My participants described two predominant narratives of identity-focused experiences, the first being helpful posts and content that taught them about the meanings of various identity labels, useful concepts, queer history, and positivity and validation surrounding queer identity. The second pattern they described is that of intra-community discourses relating to identity, specifically the meanings of identity labels, who can correctly identify as such, and the validity and belonging within the queer community of certain identities and behaviors. This usage of the term 'discourse,' which is what everyone who experienced the phenomenon called it, is unrelated to the Foucauldian concept of discourses that shape society, and refers specifically to interpersonal conflict and combative posts delineating boundaries and policing usage of identity terminology. The social processes and communities that the online-era cohort encountered centered largely on interacting with posts and content by other people within the community, and less focused on individual and interpersonal interactions with individual people or groups. Queer community online in broader contexts outside of specific interactions and groups is categorized broadly as based on commonalities of identity or interest, and as such, interactions were experienced as happening broadly over the span of entire identities and about concepts, not necessarily about individual people.

Among the most important information my interlocutors described having encountered on the internet regarding queer identity concerned the definitions and boundaries of identity labels and categories, which I will refer to as labeling specificity. Labeling specificity describes firm and concrete definitions of identity label categories, proliferated and sanctioned through content,

interactions, and discourse. My interlocutors reacted to this category-focused understanding of identity in various ways. This categorical and specific understanding of identity categories that my interlocutors encountered in online content and discourse does not correspond necessarily to fixed or biological differences between people, as hegemonic or medicalized categories of gender and sexuality would suggest. Rather, it regards an understanding that identity categories are based on specific and authentic personal feelings about gender or attraction, subjective self-understandings, and certain lived experiences. Some interlocutors cited their learning about the meanings of identity categories as critical on their path towards their own identities, and others ended up struggling against the strictness with which they perceived identity categories to be mediated in online discourse. Both the generative interactions and the discourse were focused specifically on identity boundaries, with identity categories often being described, both in helpful posts and in discourse, as having firm and specific definitions, despite the fact that these definitions were subject to dispute and variation. Authority to speak on such definitions was considered broad and diffuse, with a tendency to presume a person's standpoint and their own relationship to that identity to be the most important determiner on the subject.

Tension between specifically defined categorical identities and deconstructionist ambiguity is a longstanding ideological difference within communities organized around gender and sexual minority status. David Seidman (2002) argued that gay identity politics resulted from the enactment of institutionalized repression against a homosexual minority, and that queer politics became established as a result of the normalization of gay identity. Instrumental to the creation of gay identity were repressive strategies that served to uphold divisions between heterosexual and homosexual people, and to assert the morality of the sexual order by establishing homosexuality as polluted and abject. These divisions and the exclusion of gay people from public life then led

to the creation of distinct gay subcultures, which in turn established homosexuality as a primary identity category and a political movement that sought to end exclusion on the basis of distinct homosexual identity by way of gay pride and the establishment of a normalized gay public life (Seidman 2002, p. 3). Although this normalization strategy has been successful, it has not interrogated the structural hierarchy of sexuality itself, and has inspired both other specific identity-based political movements and the rise of queer politics, which strives to problematize the normalization of any sexual identities. Joshua Gamson (1995) described heated debates over the usage of the word queer and the fundamentally different ideological position on the role of identity between gay and lesbian activists who relied on fixed and essentialist identity categories as a basis for political organization with the goal of recognition, assimilation, and civil rights, versus queer activists who were interested in destabilizing entire concepts of gender and sexuality as fixed categories. Anti-queer arguments claimed that queerness would lead to instability of identity, which could potentially destabilize all identity-based political organizing, and ignored the tangible institutional oppression that might best be countered with identity-based organized resistance. Queer politics criticized identity-based gay and lesbian organizing for ignoring the root cultural causes of oppression and reifying the existence of sexual and gender categories, and their tendency towards an assimilationism that benefits only more normative sectors of gender and sexual minorities (Gamson 1995, p. 400).

Although labeling specificity within the gay rights movement was the manifestation of claims to political power as a specifically defined minority within a hostile political and social structure, labeling specificity within queer communities online regards conflict over validity and belonging only within the boundaries of queer communities themselves. Within the social processes experienced by my online-era cohort, identity categories are valued not as a fulcrum

for political mobilization, but for the validation and collectivization of individuals' subjective experiences of attraction and gender identity, socially relevant within insular communities and disconnected from the aim of materially advancing the status of their adherents within broader social contexts. As such, both generations' usage of labeling specificity are used in order to seek a form of validation, but the gay and lesbian liberation movements were vying for acceptance within wider society, and current online labeling specificity involves intra-community debates on what can be considered queer, essentially vying for entrance and belonging within the community itself. Past identity-politics oriented labeling specificity also corresponded to a fixity of the self as belonging to an inherently stable sexual category, whereas queer politics were interested in deconstructing both the concept of fixed identity categories and of individual selves as firmly belonging to specific categories. Online queer labeling specificity differs in that identity categories correspond to specific lived experiences, but this is not always connected to ideas of personal fixity, and fluidity of selves between identity categories that have specific meanings is not considered at odds with the specific definitions of categories themselves.

"Interacting With Concepts Rather Than People"

Participants characterized their interactions with queer community online being more focused on consuming content that discussed and informed them about identity than on directly interacting with other people. Several participants described the significance of learning about language and terminology related to queer identity through reading posts and content. As such, some of my participants' experiences with queer online communities were without much direct interaction with other people. Apollo described that one of the specific appeals of Tumblr in their

experience is that there was no expectation of engagement with other people in order to participate:

> I wasn't doing anything on social media. And it felt really like those are all places you have to post stuff, more or less, in order to engage with other people's content, and that's not something that really interests me. So I think I got on Tumblr, because my friend was on Tumblr, and I wanted to send them stuff… so, probably going through like tags of stuff, and just like seeing what kinds of discussions people were having. Or like, info posts that were going around… I follow and unfollow people at whim, I try and keep my spaces relatively chill, I try to keep politics out of them because it's easily overwhelming. So I tried to just keep them either, like, art and like, fandom centric. Whatever, I'm interested in, in that particular couple of months or a couple years. Just a low-key kind of vibe.

They described how they have deliberately kept a low profile on social media, avoided discourse at all costs including unfollowing people if they are detracting from the enjoyability of their experience. They described that they specifically were always critical of discourse, and did not specifically seek out content on social media based on identity alone, rather that they ended up following networks of queer content creators through interest in their art or content related to other interests. Jamie, similarly to Apollo, predominantly recalls reading posts as having been their main method of interaction with queer community in their formative adolescent years:

> Things just like, I feel like in the early 2012, kind of era tumblr the, like, reblog if you support gay people, and like the kind of like, positivity posts, I mean, maybe those are still around, and I might just not follow as much. But like, I felt like that was like, when I was on Tumblr, suddenly, like, the majority was LGBT. And it was like more sort of, with the assumption almost, that you're a queer, or an ally in like the sort of community spaces. I didn't really like, engage with, like randos [random people] on the internet too much. But just like seeing the different, like posts floating around. I used to just like Google search different sexualities and like famous people that were that, too… Yeah, I guess I would just like find, I would follow people's blogs. Like I remember there was a blog, someone made a post about like, coming out as trans. So you had a bunch of 'it's a boy' balloons. So I followed like that blog. I want to just like, read more about like, trans people. Yeah, mostly through tags.

For Jamie, many of their early interactions with queer communities online were done through passively absorbing information from posts, particularly that which related to concepts of

identity, in a social context that was queer or queer-supportive by default. For them, content and content creators that related to queerness itself were of great interest, especially because of the fact that their family was actively homophobic and they had no other way to access this information in early adolescence. As such, their interactions online at the time were largely connected to identity itself, because they were specifically seeking content related to it and followed content creators that actively discussed it, though without intentionally building interpersonal relationships with people through the communities that they were accessing online. Their experiences of identity formation as a communal practice were characterized by consumption of identity-related content and personally interpreting how it pertained to their own experiences.

Although some of my interlocutors described having mostly been consumers of content without much direct interactions with broader queer communities online, some interlocutors had varied experiences of the level of interpersonal connections they found online, some formed intimate and tightly knit communities and even met partners through social networks online, and some had brief interactions with people they met through social media in ways that directly engaged with identity. Some interlocutors had cursory interactions with content creators they liked, and these interactions were sometimes focused specifically on negotiating the meaning of identity. Jamie described sending messages in the form of ‘asks’ (which are a Tumblr-specific question and response message format that include an option for anonymous messages) to Tumblr blogs regarding questions about identity:

> I used to submit asks like, ‘I think I'm this, but’... like, 'can you be a lesbian if you're still attracted to non binary people?' or something like that too. Like positivity blogs… Just like wait eagerly for that response to see if it was like valid or whatever.

Caleb would send messages to content creators he liked asking their opinions on names he might potentially use, and described that these relationships were only ever centered around trans identity:

> I did, like, reach out to some of these like, influencers to ask them, like, advice on things, which was really sweet looking back on it. Like, I mean, I, it's horrible that I was asking them, but like, I was like, Do you think this name is good? Like, what's also the reason I was asking if it was good was like, is it passing? Or is it too, too common or too rare, whatever. So it was a lot of like, parasocial relationships that I had online… Always, they were only about transness.

Similarly, Rowan described that much of their early interactions with queer community on Tumblr were characterized by them contacting and asking questions about identity to various people they encountered, and utilizing those peoples' perceived expertise regarding identities to further their understanding of their own identity:

> I feel like I taught a lot of like myself, but I guess, but because like I said, just a lot of social media exposure. So I don't know if it was necessarily any like one person. I do remember this one particular friend I had on Tumblr, who identified as bisexual. And I think someone asked her to, like, elaborate more on it or something in like a Tumblr ask or question or something, and she was like, 'I think I'm mostly attracted to men, but sometimes I'm attracted to women.' and I DMed her, I was like, 'Emerald, you can do that? that counts?' And she was like, 'Yeah, that counts, the fuck do you mean?' And, and I was like, 'Oh, that might be me.' And she was like, 'Great, you're bisexual, go queen'… It would be a lot of asking folks questions… Those were like, my first interactions with like, a lot of queer folk, because I guess online, people will have like, in their bios, like all their identities and like, when you meet people in real life, unless people like, choose to introduce themselves as like, queer, I wouldn't know. And like, I don't know if that makes sense, but like, I have a sense of like, who is queer online because they say it somewhere, they have like a flag somewhere in there, like bio or name. And I, a lot of those people would be like, friends or people I would be comfortable asking these sorts of questions with, like, from a learning perspective, or like for my own purposes, kind of perspective, because like, that would be when I was trying to figure out if I was queer.

Jamie felt a desire to affirm the validity of their usage of terminology from an outside perspective who they considered able to effectively judge this issue, and Rowan realized that they could call themself bisexual after reading about and receiving affirmation around this

identity from a friend who used that label but had a different experience than Rowan realized could fit into the category. In doing this, these interlocutors engaged interpersonally with people whose opinions they trusted in the process of identity construction that centered around determining the specific meanings of identity labels and their acceptable boundaries in order to figure out what is an acceptable and appropriate way to label oneself. This process demonstrates that the boundaries of identities are socially relevant and subject to sanctioning processes within online communities, and the process of figuring out what was considered socially acceptable self-presentation or usage of terminology was of concern to my participants during their developmental stages. Rowan's observation that identity was central to individuals' self-presentation on Tumblr, which contributed to the sense of ease in finding community there, is affirmed by Oakley's (2016) research, which described how how individuals utilize the structural affordances of the site to enact non-hegemonic labeling practices by way of their usage of tags and self-descriptors on their personal Tumblr blogs. Oakley described that Tumblr users engaged in constructive practices of public identity work by displaying their sexual and gender identities on their profiles and encouraging interaction and community building by prompting other Tumblr users to submit messages and asks about their identities (Oakley 2016, 8).

Further articulating the salience of identity as a relevant matter in queer online communities, Luca described how queer community online feels as though one interacts with identity groups as a whole, rather than with specific people:

> I think a lot of the times queer community online can feel like interacting with concepts rather than people. Like, people will be like, oh, trans people on Twitter, rather than this specific trans person on Twitter. Like, bi[sexual] people on Twitter rather than the specific bi person. It would be like the entire asexuality tag on Tumblr, rather than a specific ace [asexual] person…

Luca's impression is consistent with the descriptions from other interlocutors that interactions with queer communities online are often either consumption of content or interactions specifically focused on queer identity, which contributes to both the impersonality of online queer community and that identity categories within these social contexts take on a heightened social salience. Figuring out the meanings of identity and interpretations thereof were at the forefront of the social interactions my interlocutors had with queer communities online. These personal interactions centered around the meanings of identity with people they only knew through online queer communities and had no interactions with other than these demonstrate the phenomenon of online queer communities being predominantly centered around identity itself.

The idea of communities built around the commonality of identity being central to the construction of identity categories is not new, and is central to the creation of gay identity itself, as John D'Emilio (1993**)** described. He asserted that gay identity was enabled by the widespread system of wage labor freeing young people, especially men in the early era of capitalism's ascendancy, and their ability to form social connections organized around the mutual interest of same-gender attraction created the ability for them to organize their lives and identities around gayness. As such, he argued that despite widespread historical record of homosexual behavior, gay identity is a historically specific phenomenon situated within a social structure that created the possibility for the organization of social lives around commonality of sexual identity (D'Emilio 1993, p. 470). Mirroring this historical process of community allowing for its participants to ascribe to personal identities as a result of group membership, interaction with queer communities online facilitates the structuring of self-concepts according to identity categories around which the communities are organized. Similarly to D'Emilio's description of the function of early gay communities, online queer communities enable individuals to

understand their experiences as part of a wider phenomenon, and form concepts of self and primary identities based on group membership. The proliferation of information and social processes that concern individuals' personal processes of figuring out their own relationships with identity, sometimes disconnected from any interpersonal interaction, were of central importance within these online communities. This contrasts with early gay communities, which were based around same-sex attraction and organized around physical, interpersonal, and sexual interaction. In essence, early gay communities were organized around interacting with similarly interested people and organically produced concepts of personal identity, and online queer communities are organized specifically around concepts of identity proliferation itself, with less focus on interpersonal interaction and direct community organizing.

"How Does That Apply to Me?"

My interlocutors who explored their identities through queer content in online communities described seeing posts that were informative, helpful, and validating, and through these posts they were able to develop their own conceptions of various different identities. Interlocutors described being exposed online to information regarding new identity concepts that were necessary for their self-development. Oliver, who identifies as asexual, genderqueer, and part of the trans and nonbinary umbrellas, relied on Tumblr for information about various identities that they did not find offline despite having two gay mothers and consistent access to gay people and community as a child.

> I definitely first heard of asexuality as a concept, along with transness, on like, Tumblr in 2013. Although, no I had definitely heard of transness pre that. I have two moms, one of whom was like, decently involved in like 80s and 90s activism so like, has friends who started Act Up, like, has trans friends, has dominatrix friends, anyways, yeah, cool people. So I had heard of transness. But like, had never super applied it to myself. Definitely learned about like, nonbinary as a

> concept along with asexuality and aromanticism and pansexuality all on Tumblr in 2013. And I looked at all that and I said, That's information for later. I'm far too busy being 13 currently… I learned about the Stonewall Riots, I learned about the concept of transness, I learned about the concept of gender euphoria… So I learned a ton of specific vocabulary. I learned asexual and aromantic, and then a bunch of different words under the trans umbrella, nonbinary, genderqueer, agender, demigirl and demiboy were super big in those days.

The specific information regarding concepts such as gender euphoria, which is the positive feeling associated with authentic gender presentation and perception, opposite of gender dysphoria, and the meanings of certain identity labels that were relevant and applicable to their experiences were available on the internet. Tumblr gave them information and vocabulary that was important for their emergent understanding of identity that they could not get from their mothers, the older generation of queer social networks within which they were embedded since childhood, or the queer literature to which they had access from a young age. Oliver also described how this particular information was uniquely accessible and appealing to them because it was available during their early adolescence on their phone within contexts on Tumblr. They did not join Tumblr initially to seek out information about queerness – they joined it because of their interest in seeing content related to fandoms, which are communities organized around shared interests in particular media or cultural phenomena. Although the range of knowledge and information regarding queerness available on Tumblr was diverse and wide-ranging, among the most important and commonly encountered by my participants was that which related to meanings of different identities and terminology that could be applicable to my interlocutors own lives and conceptions of themselves.

Caleb similarly knew gay people through their parents growing up and had no issue with accessing information about gay identity in person through their social networks and scholastic resources. They only discovered the meaning of trans identity online, and mentioned watching

the movie Boys Don't Cry, which affected them deeply and was one of the first things that made them question the possibility of being trans themself. Their emergent understanding of trans identity as they were undergoing the beginnings of their own transition was additionally deeply influenced by transmasculine content creators on YouTube who made videos about the process of transition, gave tips to other people transitioning, and proliferated discourse regarding the boundaries of trans identity including invalidating nonbinary people and identities. Caleb described their relationship to this content helpful early in transition when they were seeking information on how to transition, but as a painful and fraught with strict and harmful norms regarding transness that ended up causing them some harm, and they later divested from this content once they had a stronger in-person network of trans and gender nonconforming friends and the online content became less necessary to their self-concept and development.

Rowan, Jamie, Luca, and Fern all learned the definitions they use for their own identity labels, as well as those of many other identities from Tumblr during their adolescence, citing various moments in which they learned particular information or details relating to the nuances of identity labels that enabled them to see themselves relating to these identities. Jamie described that informative posts describing various identities were helpful in developing their early emergent understanding of queer identity, although in retrospect they understand these posts to have been incorrect sometimes:

> This was before I realized that like, I was gay, but I also think, just like the different posts where people used to make info posts about all those sexualities and define them. That was like a big one for me, because like, that's how I like found out quote, unquote, that like, oh, 'pan[sexual] people are attracted to nonbinary people but bi people aren't,' which like, obviously isn't true. But internet.

In their experience, labeling specificity was useful at that point in their life in which they had no other access to information regarding queer identity, and was initially helpful in their own

process of being able to figure out their own relationship to identity categories, but it led to their understanding definitions of sexualities that they came to understand later as false. Rowan described seeing discussions of bisexuality on Tumblr and the different subjective meanings that the label could have for people, which enabled them to consider the applicability of the term for their own life, although their understanding of the term and their relationship to it has changed since they first encountered it:

> Okay, just folks like, talking about these identities and what it meant to them. And I was like, Oh, I didn't know things like bisexuality can mean like only a little bit of attraction to like, women and a lot of attraction to men, which at that point, I was like, maybe that's what I am. And then the more I thought about it, I was like, oh, no, there's not really that sort of like percentage divide it's not like mostly men or masculine people for me and that like, I think maybe I've just been ignoring any attraction I have to like women or non binary folks up until this point, because I was just like, everyone has that. Everyone thinks women are so beautiful… And from then it's sort of, I think, what's the word like, I don't know, snowballed into like a bigger thing where like, I'm more mindful about like, how I experienced attraction and how I feel it.

Alex learned about queer identities for the first time in middle school on forums about the Warrior Cats book series, in which people would discuss various aspects of queerness as they understood it relating to the book characters, and additionally on Tumblr. These participants were able to conceptualize their own identities and figure out their own relationship to terminology they encountered online, demonstrating the ways in which social processes influence concepts of self. Robards et al (2020) similarly noted the importance of Tumblr as a crucial site of identity work for young queer individuals, in that they could learn about the shared experiences of other people which could educate and affirm their own processes of identity formation. The participants in this study, similarly to my own participants who used Tumblr, described that they began using Tumblr for reasons other than seeking information about gender and sexuality, most commonly that they were interested in interacting with content related to fandom. Although they

did not begin using Tumblr in order to interact with queer community or concepts of identity, they encountered queer community through their engagement with fandom, and they ended up learning definitions to identities that they were not able to find elsewhere (Robards et al 2020, 284). This study additionally noted that people were more likely to use Tumblr in order to interact with people like them, sharing commonalities of identity and interest, as opposed to people they already knew, and this socially important factor of shared identity helped facilitate its users' processes of identity construction and education around queer terminology that related to their experiences (Robards et al 2020, 286).

The most important information my interlocutors cited learning online regarded identity, definitions, and other information that aided in processes of self-discovery, although information regarding Queer history was also present and relevant in their online process of Queer development. Several interlocutors mentioned learning about the Stonewall Riots and the AIDS crisis, and several interlocutors were able to quite fruitfully research various topics in Queer history online. However, information about Queer history that they encountered on social media was described as fraught and problematic, sometimes whitewashed and centered on American queer history, and often discussed inaccurately or without nuance. Information about queer history was less immediately accessible or relevant in the social media networks in which my interlocutors were encountering information about identity, and they had a wide range of their level of interest in learning about it. Apollo described how when they researched queer subjects online, though this was not a process they described as central to their understanding of their own queer identity, it was largely related to identity terminology and not history:

> When I like to research things, I like to just throw a huge net. I'm looking at every word that I can find. I am going on several tangents. Yeah, I don't do good, like history stuff, so it wasn't so much me like Googling, like, queer histories and like understanding it through that way, but it was just trying to understand like, what

> terms am I even working with here, just so I can figure out what I'm seeing when people are discussing.

Their research into queer topics as they described was motivated by a desire to parse the terminology that was socially relevant to their experiences. Rowan described how they valued learning about aspects of queer history in college classes, but ultimately what proved more relevant to their day-to-day life was information about identity from social media:

> I did learn a lot in his [queer theory/history] class about like, homo nationalism, and like, the lavender scare, whatever. And I was like, this was stuff I didn't know. As a queer person, I should know some of this queer history. That's nice. That's fun. But I feel like sometimes just like following queer people on social media and hearing them talk about their experiences and their identity and stuff has taught me like more. Like, I don't know, like everyday stuff like stuff, I think about more like, I'm not sitting in my house thinking about like, homo nationalism. But I'm sitting in my house thinking about like, the ways different non binary people identify or like, how they conceptualize the gender things that bring them gender euphoria, or like, I'm like, how does that apply to me? I'm thinking about me in this scenario. And that's how I literally have information like stick to my brain, I guess, about queerness. But yeah, I'd say the most salient stuff and the stuff that's stuck the most with me about queerness and learning about it has been through social media.

In Apollo and Rowans's cases, the nuances of identity were the most compelling topics to consider and learn related to queerness, for Apollo because of their social relevance in the social contexts in which they were engaged, and for Rowan because of the ways they interfaced and related to concepts of identity feeling more personally relevant to their lives than queer history that felt distant from their own lived experience. Online social contexts were especially crucial in Rowan's early development of queer subjectivity because of their lack of exposure to queer community until high school, and as such, they relied heavily on information found on Tumblr for their adolescent understandings of queer identities. As such, the most relevant queer social experiences in their life at this time were those of learning and parsing the meanings of identities as personal subjective experiences, not as historical processes. As much as they appreciated

learning about queer history, it held less personal relevance for them because of the foregrounded experiences of conceptualizing identity as personal within their life.

For some interlocutors, learning the histories of certain identity labels made them feel more connected to lineages and were decisive factors in their preference for certain identity labels over others. Jean described how they prefer the term genderqueer over nonbinary, even though they understand those words to mean similar things, because genderqueer is an older word and makes them feel more connected to the historical legacy of people who existed outside the gender binary. Jamie ended up preferring to use bisexual over pansexual, despite acknowledging that the way they experience attraction would fit in with how many people define pansexuality, in part because the bisexual community is older and with more historical precedent. As such, events from queer history were incorporated within online patterns of identity construction, with individuals framing one's own experiences in relation to identity-related concepts learned online.

Although the most common pattern described to me was social media affecting my interlocutors' identities by way of teaching new information and providing opportunities to see different identities reflected in positive and validating ways, it also provided a direct way for my interlocutors to experiment with public presentation within digital contexts. Three interlocutors used social media in more direct and interpersonally exploratory ways, employing it as a tool to interact with people while presenting in different ways than they otherwise did at the time. This was less common among my interlocutors, but it demonstrates the opportunities in networked communities for safe and comfortable exploration of identity without the stakes of committing to concrete changes in presentation in one's entire life. Before their transition, Caleb had an instagram profile in which they presented as a boy in internet fandom spaces, although they did

not remember details regarding they people with whom they were interacting and the topic matter with which they were engaging:

> I also had like, an Instagram because it's really when Instagram was kind of like new, but I had a fake Instagram where I had a boy profile, but I was like, a gay boy, which is like, sure. Yeah, we got there somehow, eventually. and then I would like sort of like, I had internet friends. And it was like, we had like little fan internet things, which I don't even know what we were fans of. I was never really like a fan person… But I but I would like interact with people sort of as a boy as a way of like, cosplaying it and trying it on but I never like thought too hard about it.

Oliver also experimented with using he/him and then they/them pronouns for the first time in a specific group chat with internet friends not connected to their offline personal life, which similarly to Caleb's situation was also organized around fandom:

> I had a whole group chat of people who were also Hamilton nerds. And I haven't talked to them in years. They're all out there somewhere out there living good lives. At some point, I was like, 'Hey, can you all try using he pronouns for me?' As like, an experiment. And the euphoria I got was off of the fucking charts… I mean, like, obviously, something must have been there for me to want to try. And I was like, okay, euphoria off the charts, but it doesn't quite feel right. Let's go to they and I was like, yes, that resonates. We're gonna do this for a month only in this group chat, not tell anyone else.

Additionally, at some point in their adolescence, Jean had an account on Club Penguin (an online multiplayer game in which users' avatars were stylized cartoon penguins) in which they dressed their penguin avatar in masculine clothing and pretended to be a boy, and they had a girlfriend who they dated within the game. At one point their girlfriend saw their penguin avatar in a dress, asked if Jean was a girl, and never spoke to them again after Jean said that they were. Jean recalled this event with humor, and described it lightheartedly as one of the many examples of rejection of femininity in their youth foreshadowing their eventual gender nonconformity. This process harkens back to Sherry Turkle's 1999 essay *Cyberspace and Identity,* in which she describes the opportunities in networked technology for pluralities of identity exploration

granted by the multiplicity of specific contexts in which people can construct different versions of themselves, including opportunities to explore differently gendered aspects of the self in certain contexts through textual self-presentation. These examples affirm her observations of the multiplicity and compartmentalized possibilities for identity within online social contexts that enable their users to experiment with contextually different selves.

“What Are You Gonna Do, Call the Cops?”

Although social media provided many opportunities for fruitful and generative identity work, it also provided stress and friction over identities in the form of discourses. Every interlocutor in the online-era cohort mentioned the phenomenon of queer discourse, referring to conflict in online social contexts over the boundaries of identity labels, their validity and belonging in queer communities, or who is entitled to their usage. Similarly to the positive and affirming content with which my interlocutors interacted, this discourse was often concerned with definitions of terminology and labels, and with delineating the differences between identities. However, unlike the posts that helped individuals understand meanings and differences of identity labels in helpful and constructive ways, discourse largely functioned as an impersonal and hostile way of demarcating boundaries between identities, excluding and invalidating individuals and groups who ascribed to different ideas about identity or language. This discourse was deeply influential in the way some of my interlocutors understand the boundaries and definitions of identities, and more generally has resulted in some interlocutors' specific concern over their own usage of identity labels that they understand to be fraught and disputed. All of my interlocutors who mentioned this form of discourse spoke disparagingly of it and described it as harmful in general, and to themselves individually. My interlocutors’ criticism of online discourse and desire to

distance themselves from it is the most strong and consistent finding in all of my research, by a wide margin. However, they took different paths towards that conclusion, some of them feeling alienated from it throughout their entire experiences online and some internalizing or participating in discourse only to be critical of it later on in their development.

This discourse was experienced in some way by all of my interlocutors who were involved in queer online spaces, and was described most often as being impersonal and sometimes vicious arguments or claims about identity and terminology. The most commonly cited examples of discourse patterns regarded the meanings and validity of certain identities and terminology, including arguments about whether or not asexuality counts as a part of the queer community, the boundaries of trans identity and whether dysphoria is necessary to define oneself as transgender, and differences between bisexuality and pansexuality, and determining who can use or reclaim certain language. Christine, who describes herself as being on the asexuality spectrum, discovered the meaning of asexuality and realized its applicability in her own life after discovering it on Tumblr, mentioned that it was at the time, "one of the more stigmatized groups within queer culture," and that around the time she found the label, that many asexual people were being harrassed. She avoided because she was not actively posting on Tumblr, similarly to other interlocutors who primarily consumed content related to queer identity passively and did not directly engage or post themselves, although she mentioned that she knows people who have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from their time being entrenched in discourse regarding asexuality. Some specific arguments about asexuality regarded whether or not identifying as asexual meant needing to fit into strict definitions, described by Christine as a huge checklist including being consistently sex-repulsed, which she said does not describe everyone on the asexual spectrum. Additionally, a significant contingent of the arguments against asexuality

labeled it as not truly part of the queer community because asexual people had heterosexual-passing privilege, which purportedly rendered its queerness invalid. Christine and Apollo both cited this argument and completely rejected it, describing asexuality as being fundamentally different from heterosexuality and outside heteronormative expectations. Apollo described the discourse around asexuality as pointless and harmful quite decisively:

> I was never in the throes of it but there was like a whole thing about like ace discourse, and like, do ace people get to be involved within the queer community? Or is that even a valid identity, like, I do not even know the bounds of the argument. I just know that it was stupid, because the answer is clearly yes… maybe some people were saying that like, because it's hetero passing privilege or some stuff like that negates their queer identity or like some stuff like that… when we start getting into it, it was just pathologizing people's identities. Like, that's stupid. Yeah. Like, I thought we already figured that they belong here (laughs) because the outside doesn't want them, where are they gonna go but here. Yeah, of course they belong here.

Similarly to discourse about asexuality, several interlocutors mentioned arguments over the boundaries and validity of other identity categories as well, in particular regarding the enactment of certain norms and expectations ascribed to those categories. Caleb described a process of getting involved with a particular transmasculine YouTube subculture that they described as extremely toxic and harmful, and specifically concerned with delineating the boundaries of trans identity:

> I got sort of channeled into this group of really gatekeep-y, toxic trans men, white trans men, who were young, were about, like, you know, my age, who were publicly transitioning, and also leading some trans discourse about dysphoria, and about how transness is suffering. And so then I started to be like, Well, I'm suffering, and I'm pretty dysphoric. And I guess that means I'm trans. And also, they were talking mad shit on non binary people… I always felt uncomfortable about this, but I would watch every video they'd put out, because I was, you know, huge fan. And so a lot of the stuff was helpful, or was what I thought was helpful at the time was like, passing tips… So a lot of it was just like informative, but also very focused on passing, very focused on cis norms. And that became what I understood to be like transness and transmacness… the next video that would pop up would be like, 'non binary cringe.' And they would like pull up videos, they would like roast non binary people online…

Similarly to discourses around asexuality, this transmedicalist content was concerned with defining the boundaries of identities and to arbitrate who could and could not define themselves as such. Several interlocutors struggled against the proliferation of these expectations, and in particular the idea that certain identities benefited from the privilege of being straight-passing despite that not being the lived experience of people who identify that way. Jamie described how discourse about bisexuality on Tumblr caused them to leave the website for a while:

> I actually ended up like deleting Tumblr, because I just thought it was a little ridiculous when people are like, if you're bisexual, don't even call yourself gay. You don't have the right to that word. I just think like, if you're gonna call it gay marriage, then I'm gonna call myself gay. And just, I thought, like, stuff like that feels very, like nitpicky to me. And like, what are you gonna do, call the cops? Um, and there was also just a lot of like, 'oh, I'm worried because my partner is like, bisexual, so I feel like they're gonna lose interest in me and like, be with someone from, like, the other gender and that's gonna make me feel bad about myself.' And a lot of like, sort of hypotheticals… I think like, what was frustrating for me was this idea that all of a sudden magically, like every aspect of your queer identity is seen as going away if you're an opposite gender, male/female I guess, relationship. And and somehow this idea that magically all your like problems related to being queer go away with that.

These discourses argued that in order to identify as certain labels or categories, one must have specific life experiences or feelings, which frustrated my interlocutors whose experiences were personally invalidated by these assertions.

Some interlocutors described that the claims people made within discourses were not perceived as disagreements between individuals, rather that claims were made or interpreted broadly and generally against entire types of people who had certain identities or opinions. Luca described how disagreements between individuals, opinions, or differences of ideological position are perceived online as attacks against entire demographic groups:

> …people will act like criticizing any trans person online is criticizing the entire trans community. And like saying, 'you dislike this gay thing is saying you are homophobic.' And it's like, I think it must have been when *Love, Simon* came out.

> I remember seeing a bunch of people being like, 'you're homophobic if you don't like *Love, Simon.*' I fucking hate *Love, Simon*… I'm glad it exists and I think that gay people should have terrible corny teen romcoms but I was like, 17 by the time it came out, and I had to cover my ears like half of it because it's so intensely cringy. Like, I'm not homophobic because I don't like it.

As such, divisions between people, opinions, and identity categories were blurred, with criticisms and distinctions being either mobilized at the broad level of categories themselves, including claims regarding the experiences of all bisexual and asexual people, or being presumed as such even if they were not, including criticisms of *Love, Simon.* Several of my interlocutors described how within queer discourse, specific identities are highly salient and contested categories and the legitimacy of individuals' opinions can be dependent on their perceived identity.

Another aspect of the centrality of identity categories within discourse is the expectation that individuals' own identities are considered central to the legitimacy of their views within certain frameworks of discourse. Christine was highly critical of the enactment of the norm within online queer discursive spaces in literature communities, as she described a tendency towards discrediting individuals' opinions if they did not have the requisite identity to be able to speak on a subject:

> So seeing authors forced to come out, seeing bloggers forced to come out in order to justify why they did or didn't like a book. Like I watched bloggers be like, I like this lesbian representation. And somebody would be like, 'well, you're wrong. It's bad because of these tropes, and you're just really just some random, straight person who doesn't know.' And they'd be like, 'actually, I'm queer. And like, thanks for making me come out.'

This is different from conflict in queer community or regarding queer issues that my interlocutors have experienced in offline contexts. Jamie described in contrast that conflict within offline queer communities is more personal, with more opportunities for nuanced understanding between individuals who know and care each other, and that with personal conflicts, boundaries

of identities are less often at stake because these topics are less relevant and offline communities or groups have different issues relating to tangible factors of life that are absent online:

> I think because when you're online, typically you're in a community with someone who could be like states even countries away. So it's not like oh, I'm organizing the sapphic book club events and we need to like decide oh, like, who is invited? What resources do we need? And what specifically appeals to this group of people? It's someone you're probably never going to talk to again maybe, or like continuously argue with throughout the years, I don't know. But I think it is mostly about identity because that's the only like, I guess, space on like, when you're online, talking to people not planning to meet and do something in real life is mostly just, oh, what's your perspective on this? Do I think your perspective is valid, based on your identity? Do I think you can say those things or make those remarks based on like, your identity? Like? And so I think people hone in on that, because there's nothing else to hone in on… Because like, well, I feel like it doesn't make sense to argue about like, labels as much when there's bigger fish to fry like in the real world.

Jamie's description affirms others' descriptions of online queer communities as being centered only around commonalities and divisions of identity and opinion, with these often being the only socially relevant characteristics of the people or content with which people interact online. Several of my participants described the characteristics of online queer conflict as a particular form of discourse largely centered on the boundaries of identity and ownership of terminology, removed from considerations of individual people and the complexities of their lives. In describing the differences between conflict that arises within queer communities in person and online, conflicts in person tend to be centered on individual differences and tangible conflict over life events with more capacity for nuance and understanding. In contrast, online discourse focuses more on boundaries of identity and terminology, and the scale of conflict is both more broad and less personal.

As previously mentioned, Luca's description of online queer community interactions as being done on broad levels of entire demographic groups leads to broad identity-based discourse:

> And I think a lot of online discussion tends to kind of get lost in like, broad swaths of of 'is this entire group valid, is this entire group invalid' and that's kind of how you get the more like toxic people who are like, all bi people are terrible because there's one bi person was terrible to me one time. every trans person is horrible because a trans person yelled at me on Twitter once. That's kind of the death of nuance… It's like, because it's so clearly not a reasonable position when you frame it like that, but so many people will generalize and forget that sometimes individual people are just kind of dicks and that it has nothing to do with these categories and stuff.

Because online posts and discourse are often articulated on the scale of entire identities, and not individual experiences, this results in a trend towards generalization and flattening of identities into monolithic concepts. Dov described how identities are narrowly defined, and deviation from the specific characteristics is interpreted as harmful or transgressive:

> On the internet, there's also, I find that there's this idea of like, if you're x label, you're into this aesthetic, and you do this thing. And there are these specific niche micro identities, and if you call yourself one, but do a thing that isn't in the list of things that that identity does, it, I mean, it's like you punched a pregnant woman while parking in a handicapped spot.

Although Dov's description is perhaps hyperbolic, it addresses the way discourse online regards identities as specifically defined, and how deviation from the prescribed meanings of identities is considered problematic within these communities. My participants were critical of the way identities were categorized and policed through discourse, some of them becoming critical of labeling specificity entirely. Others accepted labeling specificity in certain ways as pertaining to authentic expression of self, while being critical of discourse that discredited others' experiences of identity or invalidated entire identity categories.

Varied Reactions to Identity Construction Processes

The online-era cohort reacted to online social processes of identity construction in different ways, displaying a range of labeling specificity in their understandings of their own identity. Several interlocutors internalized the labeling specificity to which they were exposed in online contexts, describing their identities using specific terminology that corresponds to detailed descriptions of their personal experiences of gender identity, sexual and romantic attraction, and other factors. Other interlocutors preferred intentionally vague identity labels, either out of a conscious rejection of labeling specificity, or a lack of interest in exploring nuanced categorical definitions of their experiences. Some interlocutors demonstrated an understanding of their own identity as quite specific and fixed, corresponding to their individual subjective experiences. Others described a personal understanding of identity as fluid and subject to change, some of these participants opting for more vague or generalized labels. Finally, my interlocutors displayed a wide range of context dependency in their usage of identities, which I define as the usage or enactment of different identities and presentations in various parts of ones' life. Context dependency is resultant of many factors and considerations, with some interlocutors identifying consistently in all areas of their lives, some identifying differently based on contextual levels of safety or comfort in their ability to be out of the closet, some using different language depending on how much terminology they expect people to be familiar with, and some because of their awareness of the fraught boundaries of identity categories within certain queer discourses.

The first questions I asked each interlocutor were what their gender and sexual identity are, followed by how they would define the labels they use for themselves. Every participant in the online-era cohort gave a relatively complex answer to the second question, and some implied a sense of uncertainty about their own usage of certain labels. Several of these labels' perceived

meanings were directly related to discourses that they had either observed or participated in, and some interlocutors directly acknowledged that the identity label definitions they used might be contested. Several participants were somewhat hesitant to define their identities — perhaps my prompting them to define their identity labels harkened back to seeing content online regarding the definitions of labels and conflicts over parsing these labels. Others mentioned identity labels that they think could theoretically be used to describe their personal experiences but either were not sure enough of the definitions to confidently use them or were entirely disinterested in using specific terminology to describe their identities.

I believe that my own insider positionality and personal proximity to the subject and of the interviews contributed some reflexivity to the process of my interlocutors' descriptions of their own identities, given their understanding of me as a young queer and gender-nonconforming person who had gone through similar social processes of identity construction. Within my role as an interviewer, this positioned me as a peer who could reliably understand the complexity and nuances of their identities in a way they have observed that cisgender/heterosexual people could not. However, literacy in online queer topics and language could have also introduced a concern that I might disagree with their interpretations of identity labels or be critical of their understandings, which could be connected to the occasional hesitancy some interlocutors displayed in their interpretations of identities.

“It’s Very Easy to Loosely Fit Into Some Boxes”

When discussing their own identities and the labels and descriptors they used throughout their lives, all but one of my interlocutors in the online-era cohort described a complex and fluid process with many stages in which they used different terminology to describe themselves. This

took many forms, with varying degrees of focus on terminology itself on the boundaries of its definitions, but a common theme uniting many was the shifting of one's own identity labels in response to encountering new definitions, discourses, or information on the meanings of identity labels, or in response to changing feelings, desires for certain types of expression, or changing understandings of identity itself.

Luca's self-identification process was multi-staged, and he acknowledged that the way he navigated his identity had to do at least in part with social conventions of queer labeling practices on Tumblr that were relevant at different times in his life. The first sexuality label with which he identified was as asexual, at age 12, then as a lesbian the same year when he dated a person who at the time identified as a woman. He specified that this was a very juvenile relationship, as was his conception of identity at the time. He then went on to identify as bisexual for many years and only realized he was not attracted to women when he was 19, describing how his asexuality and aromanticism complicated the process of figuring out his own feelings of attraction. In the early 2010s, he identified as a demigirl, influenced by the trend towards microlabels, which he described as a tendency to try to define extremely specific labels for individuals' nuanced and subjective experiences, creating identity categories for experiences that might be common to only a few people. He described the phenomenon as legitimate expressions of self, though sometimes terminology became less intelligible to wider audiences and occasionally diverged from direct experiences of sexual identity:

> So I'd say this maybe goes from 2013, when I was told to like 2015, maybe. And it's interesting, because it was very focused on trying to find an individual label for every individual person's experience. And I think it ended up being less helpful than people thought it was because you'd have to be constantly googling what other people call themselves. And I think it was helpful to some people because I definitely know people where they worked out something very specific about themselves based on these labels on these other experiences that people have had. But I think there was a lot of a tendency to try and use some sexuality

> microlabel to describe something that was not necessarily a sexuality related phenomenon. Like people using labels to describe, I think it's lithoromantic, to describe wanting to be in a relationship when you're not in one, but not wanting to be in a relationship if you are in one. And I think some like for some people that might have been a legitimate way they felt but I knew people who use that label, where it was like what's going on is probably something more related to neurodivergence than sexuality.

Luca described the phenomenon of microlabeling as a social phenomenon within specific online queer environments within a certain bounded time period, but as it fell out of fashion he stopped seeing others use this form of labeling as much, and stopped self-describing in this way. As such, his understanding of his own identity mirrored the trend towards hyper-specificity and subjectivity in labeling in which he was embedded at the time, but he described this as having been his authentic expression at the time, and was careful not to disparage the trend because it is a method of legitimate expression for people. He also acknowledged that the fact that he is on the Autism spectrum contributed to his desire to classify and label his identity so specifically. Currently, he considers his pronoun usage a more relevant way of measuring his gender identity than the word he uses to label it, describing how he was using they/them and he/him pronouns for some time but now uses he/him more exclusively because it would provide more clarity and fewer opportunities for confusion or misgendering when interacting with institutions, such as his university and healthcare systems. In Luca's case, we can observe how the relevant social contexts in his life, which in earlier periods were broader online queer communities and now are his university and specifically enclosed online personal friend groups, changed the salience of identity labels in his experience. The phenomenon of microlabeling, Luca's description of identity as that which is descriptive of personal subjective experience, and the validity of which is measured by whether it is an authentic expression of one's experience, is mirrored in other participants' understandings of identity as personal and subjective. This understanding of the

subjectivity of identity is in tension with discourses and posts online regarding narrow definitions of identity which some interlocutors have incorporated into their understanding and others struggle against.

As another example of the different reactions to labeling specificity that my interlocutors display, the difficulty in parsing bisexuality and pansexuality came up for several interlocutors. This illustrates their processes of changing the way they identify based on their evolving understanding of identity terminology, as opposed to changes in the personal experiences to which they ascribe identity labels. As an example, Fern and Jamie described functionally identical experiences of how they experience attraction to individuals regardless of the subject's gender, though they respectively identify as pansexual and bisexual, and both of them identified as the other label before settling on the one they currently use. Jamie described the process of discovering the term pansexuality on Tumblr in early high school, which was defined as experiencing attraction to people of all genders with no distinction, to which they personally related. In particular, the idea of bisexuality as being exclusive of trans or nonbinary people was cited as being a prevalent talking point within online discourse but not at all reflective of real individuals' relationship to the term:

> I didn't realize that bisexual also included nonbinary genders. Either that or I might have also thought that pansexual, you were attracted to trans people, but bi and like other genders you weren't. And again, I was just like, yeah, sweet. I don't care, love is love, diversity win... So I think I identified as pan just mostly like, I didn't really understand the bisexual label, and I didn't realize how much room there was in that label for me… There's also probably a lot of people who identify as pan that have the same like sexuality meaning as me, kind of like not really giving a shit about gender, I think. But with a lot of the bi people I met and am friends with in real life… first of all, most of them were non binary, and none of them had a hang up about like being super specific about bi versus pan, which I think is funny because it's always someone who like wasn't bisexual that was like, 'no, you're not'… I don't think I've actually ever come in contact with someone who said I am bisexual because I'm not attracted to nonbinary people (laughs).

Their early encounters with definitions of bisexuality that described it as exclusive of trans or non-binary people initially sparked their identification as pansexual, but they described that this information was incorrect and falsely limiting, and that it was entirely disconnected from the actual lived experiences of bisexual people in real life. Eventually they found a post on Tumblr with an excerpt from a bisexual manifesto from a decades-old publication that described bisexuality as much more fluid and inclusive, which prompted them to broaden their understanding of the label and community, situating themselves in more historic discussions of the identity. They began identifying as bisexual because they were drawn to the idea of a community and a label that has more historical legacy and is significantly more well-known outside of queer communities, and they added that they liked the colors of the flag better. Jamie's understanding of their own sexuality as it personally felt never actually changed despite their change in labels, but their journey of discovery regarding information and terminology led them down a path towards information from posts they saw on Tumblr that described specific differences between bisexuality and pansexuality, which they later found to be inaccurate and reductive.

Completely in opposition to Jamie, who gradually came to understand the possibility of overlap in meaning between bisexuality and pansexuality, which allowed them to explore their own use of bisexuality, Fern's process was that of learning about specific differences between the labels, prompting a realization that pansexuality described their experiences in a way that bisexuality did not. Fern initially began identifying as bisexual as soon as they discovered the label in middle school, given that they had previously understood straight and gay to be the only options available regarding sexual attraction, but they were attracted to women in addition to men and had not realized that there was a term for this phenomenon. They learned about

pansexuality several years later, and cited the distinction as being that bisexuals are attracted to two or more genders and pansexuals are attracted to all genders, but made it clear to me that this was their own personal understanding of the subject:

> At first, I was identifying as bisexual because I think I didn't really understand the difference between that and pansexual. And I know there's like, a big debate on bisexuality being exclusive to non binary people or stuff like that. I don't know if I believe that. To me, I just feel like bisexuality, you could be majority attracted to men and slightly attracted to women, or like, the opposite or anywhere on that spectrum. And to me, pansexuality is more like, I don't care about their gender, it's not even a consideration.

For them, the fact that they do not experience attraction differentiated by gender is of central importance to their own choice of identity label, and the fact that pansexuality explicitly denotes this is a crucial distinguishing factor, although they were careful to point out that they were not choosing this definition based on discourse regarding bisexuality being exclusive. They have encountered several different competing narratives regarding the meaning of bisexuality, including discourse around its exclusivity, and information they found useful parsing the fact that it could mean attraction to two or more genders but does not explicitly mean all genders indiscriminately the way pansexuality does. As such, Fern has internalized the information that specifically parses the definition of pansexuality that relates to them, but has rejected the information that would label bisexuality as negatively exclusive, which was the same definition that Jamie initially believed to be true and then eventually realized was not. Fern described pansexuality as part of the broader umbrella of bisexuality, and self-identifies as bisexual as well in some contexts despite feeling like it does not accurately describe them because fewer people outside of the queer community are familiar with pansexuality, although they mentioned that this issue is decreasing as general visibility increases for pansexuality. Their use of bisexual as a label is only for contextually dependent strategic purposes, and does not feel as authentic to their

experience. Both Jamie and Fern were influenced by the phenomenon of people online trying to specifically parse the differences between bisexuality and pansexuality, although they eventually internalized different information.

As such, because bisexuality and pansexuality are both disputed labels that have the possibility for significant overlap, the choice between them suggests processes of identity that depend on specific understandings of identity categories that are determined by various information and discourses. Both interlocutors are aware of the fact that they made a personal and subjective choice, which others in their situation might have made differently, about which label to use and how that corresponds to their personal experiences, suggesting an understanding that identity categories themselves have specific meanings but that these meanings are ultimately up for subjective interpretation by those who use them and that people approach identify from different perspectives.

Hayfield & Křížová (2021) affirm that pansexuality is often used by individuals who explicitly want to include trans and nonbinary individuals in their experience of attraction, that pansexual people strategically label themselves as bisexual within certain social contexts, and that the positioning of bisexuality as being exclusive or reconstructive of gender binaries in opposition to pansexuality has led to discourse. Their research similarly describes how many individuals, nearly identically to Fern, define pansexuality as the most inclusive identity and specifically most accurate to their experiences of attraction, and that they have seen others describe bisexuality as exclusive or binary, but are careful to personally disavow themselves from that understanding (Hayfield & Křížová 2021, p. 180).

Rowan and Caleb also acknowledged the complications around the differences between bisexuality and pansexuality, but have incorporated these difficulties into their presentation of

identity in different ways. When I asked Rowan to define the labels they used for their sexuality, they described that they are fond of bisexual as a label for themself despite an awareness that some people might take issue with their definition:

> "Bisexual and queer for me kind of just means that gender is not really a barrier for attraction for me romantically or sexually, I kind of just vibe with who I vibe with. I know there's sometimes beef about bi versus pan or whatever, but I don't know. Bisexual is the label I sort of picked out for myself in my Tumblr days, and it's kind of just stuck with me, I'm attached to it."

They prefaced their own personal understanding of bisexuality with an acknowledgment of discourse on the subject after I had asked only for their own definition of the label at the beginning of our interview, without any prior mention or questions about discourse. Evidently, the act of parsing the definition of bisexuality was reminiscent for them of discourses around the subject, or they were being mindful of impression management and attempting to mitigate the potential social divisiveness resulting from an incorrect understanding of bisexuality. Discourses surrounding the term have been relevant to their experience of how the identity is mediated within their social contexts, and they are aware that they use an identity label in a way that could be perceived by some as possibly being incorrect. Additionally interesting to note is that Rowan's description of their experience of attraction being independent from the gender of the subject of their attraction is similar to Fern and Jamie's descriptions of their experiences of attraction, and their disclaimer acknowledging the disagreements regarding the definitions possibly stemmed from Rowan having seen similar definitions of sexuality labels that describe their experiences as corresponding to pansexuality. Rowan, Fern, and Jamie all described processes of learning the meanings of identity labels on social media, Rowan and Jamie's experiences being particularly centered on Tumblr.

Unlike Rowan, who personally identifies as bisexual despite an awareness of the term's contested position, Caleb's contextually dependent label usage directly mirrors online discourses about the meanings and definitions of labels, with an active awareness that other queer people have certain perspectives on the meanings of certain words and may take issue with particular usage of terminology, and have expectations that people's identity labels must correspond to and outwardly communicate specific experiences:

> "Pansexual, I think is a label that, for me… You know, I kind of use it as a way of describing to people who queer feels too vague to them. And so pansexual feels like something I can be like, Well, I'm what you might think of as bisexual. But I also, like, don't want to, you know- and I don't necessarily think that people who define themselves as bisexual rule out trans people or non binary people, but that way, I'm like, explicitly including non binary and trans people within that label… This has never happened with someone who defines himself as queer but it has happened with people who identify as gay or identify as lesbian or even bi. I've found that people want more specific definitions of what I'm doing in bed or who I'm attracted to, or who I'm romantically attracted to, or whatever, like they want to be able to picture it. And so then I tend to pivot to pan because that feels just a little bit more like, 'well think of, you know, bi, and then sort of add a little bit to it.' And I think queerness is like something that is a lot more fluid in the way that it shows up in my life. Like, it's not specifically just my romantic or sexual orientation. It's how I move through the world, it's how I interact with people. It's not necessarily sexualized, but it is also sexualized."

Caleb prefers to use queer as an umbrella term to describe their gender and sexuality, and feels most personally comfortable with that term, but is aware that there are people within the queer community who would criticize that for being too vague, and compensates for this by also describing themself as pansexual. They only feel the need to use this label strategically around people who demand more specific information about their sexual attraction, and mentioned that they would self-describe as pansexual instead of bisexual specifically to communicate that they are including trans and nonbinary people, though they said similarly to Fern that they do not assume that people who identify as bisexual exclude such individuals. They described that their sexuality has been under scrutiny, including by other people in the LGBT+ community, and that

vague identities are problematized by some individuals within the community. For Rowan and Caleb, intra-community understandings of firm and specific meanings of identity labels and an expectation that one must use a label that corresponds to a nuanced and specific personal experience has been a source of tension. Both of them worry that their own usage of identity labels would be disagreed with by other members of the queer community, and are at least to some extent preoccupied with impression management and ensuring that their usage of identity labels are not incorrect or perceived as problematic. As such, labeling specificity is a source of tension and potential conflict with other queer people, who might assume certain things that are untrue about them based on the way that they utilize identity labels.

Unlike the previously discussed participants who all in various ways have incorporated labeling specificity into their own usage of identity categories, several of my participants who engaged in identity construction online have for various reasons developed an intentionally vague method of self describing their own identity, often directly as a response to tension resulting from the expectation of specificity in labeling discourses. All of my interlocutors who label their identities vaguely, or reject the impulse to label entirely, acknowledged the existence of specific labels with particular meanings. Some of them mentioned identity labels that would in some way be descriptive of their experiences, but were not interested in using such specific terminology for themselves. Apollo, the only participant in the online-era cohort who did not go through stages of using labels that they no longer identify with, is comfortable describing their gender identity in vague terms, but is uninterested in identity labels that feel too specific:

> So for me, nonbinary, it was just like, I never really connected to like, femininity, womanhood, what was assigned to me by like my family and upbringing. It just never really clicked to me. It didn't make sense. And then I like, started experimenting with genders. And again, nothing feels right, just none of it. So what subset, you could say is like agender, but that also to me feels kind of pinpoint-y, too pinpoint-y… Yeah, transmasc, just meaning that like, I generally

> feel more comfortable in a like masculine presentation. Or if something has to be gendered, I'd rather be masculinized than feminized… I'm bisexual, because I think that was the first like, queer identity in terms of like sexuality that I picked up, which was like, yeah, that feels right. And then I just stopped thinking about it after that. Like, that's mostly what all those labels are to me. It's like, yeah, it's kind of like this, and then that was good enough and then I just moved on.

Their experience of labels is more utilitarian, and they were never interested in finding an identity category to match their specific feelings or experiences the way that some people, such as Fern, Luca, and Alex, are interested in using labels that describe their specific experiences of attraction or feelings of gender identity. Apollo, who to some extent utilized social media for learning about queer identity and terminology, cited their friends in high school as a far more important source for information and knowledge, and did rely heavily on definitions found online for their own process of identity formation. Additionally, they have actively avoided discourse throughout their time using social media, and have not been as immersed as other participants have in identity-focused queer communities in which labels and categories were of particular social importance. They could not remember any specific experiences in which they learned information about queer identity from the internet, never developed personal relationships with people they met online, and described their queer engagement online as focusing more on following queer artists and content creators whose work they enjoy, with their queerness being more incidental.

The preference for vagueness for some participants was in acknowledgement of the fluidity of identity and the changing feelings upon which their identity is based, and an awareness of the contextual dependence of their own identities. Christine, Jean, and Rowan all identify broadly and intentionally as Queer, although they use other words and labels in generalized ways to describe their experiences but to various extents shy away from using more specific labels in their own personal understandings of their identities. In particular, Jean described that they were

not interested in labeling their sexuality at all, as they described: “I'm kind of just into who I'm into, and I don't think about it too much. It's not so much of a matter of personal expression for me.” They understand their identity to be fluid and constantly changing, not fixed or concrete, and as such feel like an identity label would become irrelevant and even bothersome:

> It's definitely very much trying to just go against the norm, not trying to be too attached to any one definition of myself, because I feel like I'm constantly changing. I don't want to become too attached to something, and then be feeling differently and then have this internal struggle.

Jean acknowledged the fact that identity is utilized as a way to describe and express specific feelings and experiences of attraction, but was personally uninterested in using identity labels this way because of a desire not to conform to patterns they observed in other people and communities, and an acknowledgement of the fluidity of sexuality within their experiences. Their categorization of their desire not to use a specific identity label as a countercultural act signifies their understanding of the social relevance of labeling specificity within queer communities. Similarly, Christine describes her sexuality as Queer, utilizing an intentionally vague and broad definition of her identity because she has gone through several iterations of sexuality labels:

> “In the past, I have used ace, I've used bi, I've used lesbian very briefly, but it's weird and changes all the time, so I just use queer… for me, queer is an intentionally broad catch-all. It's like, once we get into the nitty gritty, it's like, well, I'm 1000 different things, because human beings are complicated, and it changes and it fluctuates. And I think that the fact that queerness and for the LGBTQ entire spectrum, it does fluctuate and change, and some of it is intentional choices, and some of it is not… it's very easy to loosely fit into some boxes, but I don't want to do that. I just want to live outside of boxes. And for me, just using the word queer is the easiest way to do that and being like… ‘you want more specifics? No. Why? I don't have them and neither do you.’”

Christine still considers herself to be on the asexuality spectrum, but leaves it there without wanting to define her own personal identity so specifically, and does not actively label herself as

asexual as strongly as she did upon first discovering the term and its definition on Tumblr while she was in college. Both Jean and Christine at different points in their lives have used more specific terms to describe their sexuality, but do not feel as though they need to use their identity to describe the specifics of how they feel about attraction, and are more interested in keeping their identity broad to more easily allow for flexibility and changes in how they feel.

This is in contrast with Luca and Alex, who have similarly through different iterations of their identities but settled on the ones they currently use that all describe specific experiences. Alex described the social and relational process by which he came to their current understanding of his own identity, and an understanding of the fluidity of identify in individuals' experiences:

> it's like, like bisexual and bigender. So for like, eight years of my life, I identified as a lesbian. And I definitely feel like that was a big part of my life, of eight years being a lesbian. And it just feels like when I'm with a woman, I would be like a gay woman, or like, with a man, I'm a gay man… I actually do have like, sexual trauma. And, you know, I think a lot of that was why I identified as a lesbian and why I didn't want to admit, I like wanted to be more masculine for a long time… And then in high school, like seeing more men go through puberty, or like, finishing up, it's like, 'oh, I really want facial hair, and I don't like my chest'… And seeing [my best friend] Violet specifically start to socially transition was really like, Oh, I gotta get on this… But then, you know, realizing, like, I love a man, it was very, like that kind of changed the gender too… it's like, a very powerful identity. But like, I have the belief that like, sexuality can be fluid, just like as you grow up. It's not for everyone, obviously. But it is a very individual thing that you experience as you grow up. And so that that was some metamorphosis I had, like I happen to have.

Unlike Luca, who described some of his past identities as ultimately having been incorrect steps on his path towards figuring out the true way he experiences attraction, gender, and subsequently how he describes his identity, Alex described his past identities as having been legitimate and sincere, not merely as having been incorrect steps along the path towards his one concrete identity. His identity as a lesbian was a true and authentic experience at the time, and he still feels a fondness and affinity for butch expression specifically. The uniting factors for all

these participants, despite differences in their current understandings of their own identities and a broad range of vagueness and specificity, are that they understand identity labels themselves within the way they are socially enacted to have firm and finite meanings that correspond to specific experiences, despite the fact that these meanings are often disputed and subject to personal interpretation. They understand their own personal experiences to be fluid and subject to change despite their more narrowly defined perception of identity labels, corresponding with both definitional posts and discourses that portray identity labels as having specific, if disputed, meanings. As such, these participants display a usage of identity itself that trends towards specific descriptive categories of experience, but an understanding that individuals' personal experiences are fluid and changing, and that it is acceptable and even expected for people to have stages of using multiple and different labels over the course of their lives.

"Oh No, I'm Pretending to be Gay"

Some of my participants have experienced uncertainty about the meanings of certain labels and as a result were hesitant to identify in ways that they might otherwise feel apply to their experiences, suggesting a particular knowledge base is necessary in order to properly embody identity categories. They described a lack of certainty that identities correspond to specific feelings, were doubtful about their applicability to their own experiences, or that they might not know enough about a label to be confident that their usage of the term would be correct. As previously described, Jamie asking blogs on Tumblr if it would be acceptable for them to identify as a lesbian if they were attracted to nonbinary people is one example of personal doubt of one's own definitions of identities and an instinct to defer to a perceived expert in order to

determine the validity of one's own identity usage. Fern was unsure exactly how to describe their experience of gender when I asked them to define what nonbinary means to them:

> I would say, it means I don't really feel like any gender. Like, I don't have any attachment to being a woman or being a man. I guess more specifically, it would probably be closer to agender, but I'm not like, you know, 100% sure. So I just go by nonbinary.

They understand their own experience to be that of a lack of personal feelings regarding gender, to which they ascribe the broad category of nonbinary, and could possibly be defined as agender, but felt uncertain in their knowledge of the identity enough to confidently self-describe as such. This hesitancy to identify as agender stemming from uncertainty is different from Apollo's hesitancy about using the same term, which stems from their general lack of interest in using an identity label that describes specific feelings, despite their confidence in the meaning of the term. Both Apollo and Fern displayed an understanding of agender as an identity that specifically means a lack of personal feelings of any gender, which describes a subjectively interpreted experience in a particular way. The differences in their reaction demonstrate different ways individuals react to labeling specificity, with Apollo rejecting the label for themselves entirely despite the possibility of it describing their experience, and Fern being open to using it to describe themself but displaying uncertainty about using a label that they are unsure is accurate for them.

Similarly to Fern's hesitancy to self-describe using an identity label because of uncertainty about its specific meaning and applicability to their life, Jean at one point identified as trans, but no longer does as strongly because they feel the identity is not quite accurate for them to use given the differences between their experience and those of binary trans individuals:

> I did use trans for a period of time. Which I'm not like, I don't entirely disagree with for myself personally. But I also, I don't like using it, because I don't have like the same experiences as like, binary trans people. And so I do face like the

> same challenges and stuff, so I feel like by using it, it's not like appropriating but it's like, it's just not entirely accurate.

Despite the fact that Jean still feels in some way that the label of trans could fit them, they displayed an awareness that trans has a more specific definition that corresponds with lived experiences that do not match theirs, and is concerned with misusing the label. This concern with the perceived accuracy or validity of a label's usage suggests that labels are in some way arbitrated, though it is unclear and diffused throughout discourses who has the authority or knowledge to do so.

Rowan's experience with seeing discourse around asexuality was personally detrimental to them and introduced self-doubt into their own process of identity construction. During high school, when they were encountering online discourses around asexuality, they were identifying as asexual (which they still do, although less strongly than they did at that time), and they encountered discourse that invalidated their belonging within the queer community, which deeply and personally affected them:

> There'd be a lot of like, 'ace people are a part of the queer community,' or 'ace people aren't part of the queer community, like, and here's why.' And I'd be like, I don't know what's the right side, what's like the right side of history, and I've been like, I want to close the computer and enter the real world and be like, it's not that deep. Like, if someone tells me they're asexual, I'm not going to be like, you don't think you're like, queer or like, you're not queer, like you don't feel invalidated, right? Like no one's doing that. Yeah, I didn't realize that until a while later. I guess because a lot of my social interaction was on the internet. So that was like, what was most like salient and most important to me. But a lot of it would sort of be like, just a lot of like, self worry, and self doubt about me, like taking the right stance or having the right opinion. Because I felt like that was a thing people were very concerned with, and because I did identify as asexual at the time. I've seen people be like, asexual people aren't queer, here's why. I'd be like oh, no, I'm pretending to be gay, like, wait, like what's happening?

Worth noting in this case is that at the time, Rowan was actively in charge of their high school's Gay Straight Alliance, and was in a long-term gay relationship throughout the duration

of their time in high school that was publicly known and celebrated throughout the queer community at their school. Effectively, they were a queer role model among their peers, and were actively immersed in an in-person community that validated and nurtured their identities and experiences. However, their immersion in online discourse that debated their own identity, its validity, and whether or not people who identify as such belonged in the queer community introduced serious self-doubt and induced anxiety about not actually being allowed to identify as queer. They described that it took them several years and a conscious divestment from discourse-laden sites to overcome the worry that their asexual identity was not valid. The perceived experts in these cases had no distinctly prescribed authority and were unconnected to any medical or social institutions, but nonetheless possessed some level of perceived validity with which to speak on the issue, mostly based on their own usage of labels granting authority to speak on them. My participants' uncertainty around terminology and their own validity in their usage of identity labels suggests that they perceived a self-negating differential in expertise regarding correct meanings and usage of identity categories.

Caleb, completely in opposition to the previous descriptions of my participants' uncertainty regarding label usage, described their experiences in which they perceived their own expertise and ability to arbitrate the meanings of labels due to their consumption of transmedicalist content. They described that the information they had believed at this time was incorrect and harmful, and that they actively contributed to discourses regarding labeling specificity:

> They [transmasculine content creators on YouTube] would make fun of people who didn't want to get top surgery and were comfortable with their chest, but still identified as a man and like, they would really, like, delineate the lines of like, who is trans and who isn't, and they would misgender people. And I always was like, 'that's mean and and I'm not into that,' but I don't want to be cringe. And so I would, you know, I was like, no way would I use they/them pronouns… I think, you know, I've had to do a lot of reconciling with harm that I unconsciously perpetuated. Because, because I was the first person besides my best friend, to

> come out as trans, and came out as trans, you know, a trans man and he/him, but there were other trans people in my friend group and in my life… I've had people who people came up to me, and were like, 'I think I'm trans too.' And that is a lot of responsibility… I was like, 'this is my experience with my transness, and this is what I know the rules of it or whatever, so are you dysphoric?' And they'd be like, 'well, kind of in this way, and not in that way.' And I was like, 'well, I don't know.'

Having internalized limited definitions of trans identity based on content they encountered on YouTube, which they sought out early in their transition out of a need for guidance and validation, they perpetuated discourses labeling specific experiences of trans identity as more correct or authentic based on experiences of dysphoria. Caleb has come to deeply regret the harm caused by the strictness with which they understood trans identity at the time, has since then completely changed the way in which they socially mediated the boundaries of transness, and no longer considers themself in a position to speak on the validity or authenticity of others' experiences. They are now critical of the content creators they once looked up to for their perpetuation of cis-normative standards of beauty and gender presentation, and the imposition of their own pain and insecurity as strict boundaries of identity:

> I was watching young people who, who were really hurting and like really scared, and they were, they were acting as like champions and like leaders within the trans community, but were so young, and they had no understanding of the generational like, you know, significance of like queerness and transness and all of that, and they, they were redefining transness within like a very patriarchal, white supremacist like lens… For the longest time, my transness was solely defined on the fact that I was dysphoric. And that's how they defined it. That's what they would say, they would be like, as the leaders, they would be like, you know, this person, they would get online and be like, This person isn't trans because they're not dysphoric, or they're not dysphoric in a way that I deem like, you know, valid… But it was a lot about just like, how can we talk about how valid we are because of our suffering and talk about how you're not suffering and you're experiencing trans joy? And that's cringe because you are not trying to go into like, cis, normative ways of being.

My participants in several cases struggled against the proliferation of strictly defined meanings of identities, and their identity formation processes have been subject to perceived social norms regarding the meanings and acceptable usage of identity labels from within the queer communities with which they engaged online. Byron et al (2019) discuss how many Tumblr users ended up finding the platform uncomfortable because of the intensity of discussion, particularly that which related to identity work and the boundaries of identity (p. 2250). Similarly, Robards et al (2020) described that "the intense drive on Tumblr to define vocabulary, circulate perspectives on power, and generally tackle the challenging ideas that we identified above can be experienced and levied as a negative style of policing." (p. 288). This results in users' discomfort with the platform and disillusionment with the platform, and often in their eventual departure. These articles described how discourses regarding identity and the search for clear definitions of identities were stressful to Tumblr users, but does not interrogate how these discourses are incorporated into the ways that Tumblr users conceptualize identity itself.

Both of these articles describe how Tumblr provides opportunities for education regarding identity, and ways for individuals to connect and share experiences that are generative and supportive to their identity construction processes. They present a narrative that describes Tumblr as being helpful for queer users to learn and explore identity terminology and presentation in constructive online communities that are often more nurturing and open to flexibility of identities than their users' offline lives, but the eventual intensity of those communities becomes unpleasant and the users leave once they no longer need them. Robards et al (2020) describes Tumblr as a place in which its users are acquainted with a form of queer pedagogy, in which users learn concepts and terms that can describe aspects of their experiences (p. 287), but makes no mention of the social sanctioning mechanisms and strictness with which

identity labels are conceptualized and described, describing only the existence of conflict and intensity that eventually makes some users leave. My findings extend the ways in which queer pedagogy manifests and is inextricably linked with this conflict — not only do individuals learn new terms and concepts on social media, but they additionally learn how these terms are socially mediated and that identity categories are policed within discourse and are not universally available for their own experimentation. The conflict not only causes individuals to leave Tumblr, but actively complicates their processes of identity construction. This conflict causes confusion over the boundaries and validity of terminology, who is allowed to call themselves which labels, who belongs in the queer community more broadly, and who has the right to speak on these subjects.

“Because, You Know, Cis People”

Many of my participants described contextual dependency in their usage of identity labels and language. In most cases in which a participant used different identity language in various contexts, this contextual dependency regarded tangible measures of comfort and safety, with the implication that the most real and authentic measures of identity would be shared freely around other like-minded and supportive queer individuals and cohorts. In contrast, more cisheteronormatively hegemonic labels and personal presentation would be used in unsafe, professional, or family contexts. As such, context dependency of certain identities based on safety and legibility regards certain aspects of self to be more authentically true about them, but may be reserved only for people who are close to them and can be trusted to understand. Several interlocutors described how the contextual dependency of their usage of different identity labels corresponds directly with the perceived expertise with which a given person or group will be

able to understand the meanings and complexity of their identities. They described that they only talk about their identities in the most true, authentic, and complex way to other queer people who are equipped to understand the meanings of their labels or the specific feelings and experiences associated with their identities.

Several of my participants, notably Apollo, Jean, and Christine, do not actively present themselves differently in any particular contexts, but described how depending on context their identities are sometimes misunderstood. Christine stated with gratitude that she has no contexts in which she has to present herself differently:

> I'm incredibly lucky and that there is not a particular area of my life where I need to be closeted, or hide myself in any particular way. I'm fairly public online about who I am. I'm very public at the bookstore about it to the point where like, I've cultivated an extremely queer staff as well… I'm out to pretty much my whole family, like, the joke I keep making is like, if you don't know, that's on you, because like I'm not subtle about it. Like, there's a pride flag hanging up in my room, my pronouns are in my bios. Like I talk about it, I've written articles about, like, demisexuality, and what that means for like, online journals. Like I'm not quiet about it. So if people don't notice that's on them, but I do not mask or not share in any particular intentional way.

Christine is consistent with her queer identity and presentation in every area of her life, and characterized other people's potential misunderstandings as their own fault, stemming from their own inability to grasp her clearly communicated identity presentation. Apollo and Jean both noted that people outside the queer community sometimes do not understand their identities, but neither of them want to go to the effort of explaining it. Apollo feels and presents their comfortable gender expression consistently, but is aware that outsiders' perceptions do not always line up with their intentions:

> I've never stopped changing the way that I present. I dress in what's comfortable for me and I speak with like, all that stuff never changes. But it is always an outsider's perception of me that it's like, you're clearly missing something. But I'll let you believe that that's what it is, because explaining that that's not what it is, is gonna take forever.

Unlike Apollo's relative nonchalance towards being perceived in certain ways that differ from their expression, Jean is frustrated by the lack of legibility of their identity by people outside the community, and the outwardly imposed expectations that gender-nonconforming people must present in certain ways:

> something I've been struggling with recently, I think, is that I very much like being feminine. And as like, someone who looks like a girl. Like, often people don't get it when I tell them that I use like they/them pronouns or that, like I'm nonbinary. And like, that's fine, like I understand. But it's also frustrating, because it's like, somewhat invalidating, because it's like saying that you need to look a certain way to be non binary, which is like literally the opposite… I think more from like, cis/het folks. So yeah, people who are just like, I don't get it. And I'm like, I'm not going to explain it to you. I don't have the energy.

In Apollo and Jean's experiences, despite their desire to have their identity understood consistently in all areas of their life and a lack of deliberate shifting of their presentation depending on context, they both experience a disconnect in the legibility of their identities outside of queer communities. Their experiences, consistent with other interlocutors, are that of queer people and communities being the most well equipped to understand their identities and presentation, which for them has more to do with gender presentation than labeling. Noteworthy as well is that Jean, Apollo, and Christine are all people who prefer to vaguely label their identity and are uninterested in employing identity labels that correspond to specific feelings or experiences. For Jean and Apollo especially, the relevant disconnects in their life would regard their desire to be perceived as queer or gender nonconforming, and not the legibility of a specific identity label outside of communities in which relevant labels would be understood.

For my interlocutors with contextually dependent usage of labels or identity presentation, their contextual dependency corresponds most often to levels of perceived comfort and safety, with identities being strategically employed or hidden within wider cisgender/heterosexual

normative contexts including work and family. Dov, a butch trans dyke, has a varied set of responses for public identification depending on safety and legibility:

> I have never called myself a dyke around my family. Yeah, I don't know that I ever will. They know I'm trans and non binary. I've like more or less said that I'm some sort of woman but that doesn't seem to be a thing that people have processed, I think largely because I still present butch… I would say that, in my professional life, like I currently have a part time job as a substitute teacher for a temp agency. I don't like it, but I'm strategically in the closet there. Yeah. And, honestly, the thing about identifying as a trans dyke is something that I've kind of only really discussed in private with my partner.

Dov additionally described how her pronoun usage depends on who she interacts with because certain people can be counted on more than others to have a respectful and compassionate understanding of certain pronouns:

> I'm thinking about it now and there's a certain, my pronoun usage in a particular place speaks a lot to how safe I feel and how much I am negotiating identity. Like for example, if you ask me my pronouns, I would say they/she/it. If I hear a cis person call me ‘it,’ I'm swinging. Yeah, because that doesn't fly, but like, to other non binary trans people, if I'm say, oh, yeah, well, I kind of like it/it's pronoun, sometimes. They get that, even if they themselves don't use those pronoun or feel weird about it, because I know 'it' is a really charged one for obvious reasons. Yeah, there’s like an understanding of, even if I refer to you with 'it', I still see you as a person deserving of respect. Whereas if, I don't know, my brother in law referred to me as such a way I don't know for a fact that that is there.

In Dov’s case, the contextual dependency of their pronoun usage changes based on the level of understanding, legibility, and respect they can expect to receive, which differs significantly between trans/nonbinary people and cis/het people. Alex similarly described how despite the complex and relationally dependent experience of his gender, he cannot convey such nuance of experience outside of queer cohorts:

> So like talking to cis people, it's kind of like talking to a toddler about gender… Like, when I came out, the goal was to just masculinize, but my parents are old, so it's just like, okay, the least dysphoric thing is being a man. So if they, like, you know, I like masculine terms and stuff like that. I don't like when strangers call me she and stuff like that, but like, when I'm with friends, or my partner, like, then that kind of changes, like, then there's the they in there, and then, like, the very

> occasional she, and I prefer them interchangeably. So it would be like, 'she is my boyfriend' or 'he is my wife.' Like, that's what I always say, like how I like them used. But like, in the workplace where like, I'm trying to, like, pass safely, then it's like, okay, he, he, he. I'm also in the medical field. I went through Planned Parenthood for testosterone. Um, but to be nuanced in the medical field is kind of dangerous, because any chance they get to not give you these hormones, they kind of take.

With other queer people, Alex and Dov are both more comfortable with a range of pronoun usage because they know that other queer and trans people understand and respect the fluidity and ambiguity of their experiences. Alex defaults to a more consistent masculine presentation and pronoun usage within other contexts, including his family, workplace, and within medical institutions, because that is more legible and less dysphoric in contexts outside queer communities, and is necessary to ensure his access to gender-affirming medical care. Several interlocutors mentioned not being out, either completely or partially, to parents or other family members, including Fern, Jamie, and Rowan, and they described that their family members would either be hostile towards their identities or that they would not understand certain identity labels or pronoun usage. Several interlocutors additionally mentioned workplaces, scholastic institutions, and medical systems as contexts in which they have to use different identities and language because of safety, comfort, and ensuring access to resources. Fern, who works at a bookstore, described how they dress and act more femininely at work out of a fear of bias and harassment from the public, but is able to present authentically in their internship working with a local pride center running support groups for queer youths. In that context, their interactions with queer adolescents who are confident and assertive empower them to be more confident in their own presentation.

A few interlocutors described the ways that the knowledge differential between cis/het and queer individuals was a defining factor in their ability to comfortably use their most authentic

labels, pronouns, and expressions. As Fern mentioned, they used to run into the issue of people not knowing about pansexuality, and defaulted to publicly identifying as bisexual because of its more widespread usage, although they described that this issue is decreasing as pansexuality increases in visibility. Luca distinguished immediately at the start of our interview that he shortens the way he describes his identity around cis people:

> Luca: I would, if I were to try and do it in short form, I describe myself as a trans gay man. But I'm more so like somewhere on the aro spectrum and somewhere on the ace spectrum. And, like a little bit non binary, but mostly, I just described myself as a trans man because, you know, cis people.
> Gil: Yeah I know, I feel you, but if you had to describe it long form, is there a more complicated answer?
> Luca: I describe myself as a non binary trans man who is gay, um probably like, demisexual demiromantic.

For convenience and legibility, he simplifies the way he describes his identity outside of queer communities, although to him this shortened version of his identity feels less true and descriptive of his experiences. In their expressions of identity that they describe as most true and authentic, Fern, Alex, and Luca utilize specific labels to describe their direct personal experiences of gender and attraction, but find that people outside queer communities sometimes do not understand the meanings of this terminology or cannot be relied to grasp the nuances and complexity of identity and and personal experiences.

Rowan, who is in graduate school for mental health counseling and does therapy work predominantly with queer clients for their internship, specifically makes sure to specifically label their gender and sexual identity in the workplace so that queer clients feel comfortable and confident that they are part of the community and understand the terminology:

> Right now I, like do a lot of therapy work with a lot of queer people. And, like sometimes people can just like, look up and see in my little bio, how I identified, but if someone asked me like, oh, how do you identify? I feel like if I were to be like 'I don't really like label it,' like, not that they would say anything about it, but also, I think here, like maybe seeing like a very feminine woman-y looking person

> be like 'I don't have a label,' might make people I'm working with question like, 'so is that like a queer person, or is she just like saying no label to make me feel better?'… So I feel like at least in that space, when I'm doing therapy with people, it helps them to have a label for me, where I'm like, 'Hi, I'm Rowan, and I'm bisexual and genderqueer,' like that maybe affirms that they're working with a queer therapist, rather than like, 'Hi I'm Rowan and I don't really have a label for anything,' then it's just like, are you cool here? Do you get queerness? Do you get queer labels?

Despite being personally unsure about how to label their gender identity and having described that they sometimes wish they could forgo having to label their gender entirely, Rowan makes sure that they have labels regarding it visible to their clients at work in order to ensure that they know they are part of the community and can be counted on to have the expertise in interacting with queer identities and presentations with which people outside of the queer community cannot be counted to have. As such, Rowan displays an active understanding of the value of expert knowledge regarding queer terminology in providing other queer people a sense of comfort and safety.

Oakley (2016) argues that nonbinary and gender-nonconforming labeling practices on Tumblr, despite being born of hegemonic discourses of sexuality labeling, provide an opportunity to make LGBTQIA genders and sexualities recognizable, and gives those outside the community a way to understand these identities (p. 11). My findings complicate this assertion, and suggest that queer individuals who utilize specific labeling practices that describe their authentic experiences around other queer people do not use the same language or labels around people outside of queer communities. Hayfield & Křížová (2021) found similarly in many cases that their participants' usage of pansexuality was conceptualized the most authentic way to understand their experiences, and that they strategic used bisexual identification in contexts outside queer communities in which they found that pansexual identity was unknown or illegible. As such, awareness of identity labels functions as a form of subcultural knowledge, and their

participants understood individuals outside queer communities as less enlightened and educated about gender and sexuality than they were (p. 182). They additionally found that their participants overwhelmingly cited Tumblr as a space in which they were educated about pansexual identity and felt comfortable expressing their most authentic usage of identity labels (Hayfield & Křížová 2021, p. 184). This in-group/out-group distinction mirrors Luca's description of the lower level of sophistication and nuance with which cis people understand gender, Fern's strategic usage of bisexual labels, and other participants descriptions of the way they present their identities as the most authentic and complex around like-minded queer people who possess relevant subcultural knowledge regarding gender and sexuality.

In every case in which my interlocutors described contextually dependent enactment of identity labels, pronouns, or presentation, they described that the most true and complex versions of their presentation were enacted around other queer individuals. For some individuals, this corresponded with a lack of safety in outside communities or institutions, and for others it corresponded to a lack of confidence that their identities would be properly understood. For the participants whose identities do not correspond to specific labels or categories, the disconnect in outside communities and institutions corresponds to a lack of legibility of their queerness or gender nonconformity. For the participants who use identity label terminology to describe specific experiences of gender and attraction, the disconnect regards the legibility of the terminology they use, and the fact that the nuances and complexities of their true experiences would be misunderstood or disrespected outside of queer communities. The contextual dependency for those who use specific labels to describe their personal experiences did not always correspond to them being closeted, but that they used a label that still displayed their queerness but not the most authentic or detailed description of their experiences. As such, an

overarching experience within my online-era cohort is an understanding of both sympathy and expert knowledge regarding identity within queer communities, and a need to either hide or simplify their identity presentation outside of queer social contexts.

Conclusion

Identities are ever-changing phenomena, reconceptualized in every context and arising in different forms based on the social structure of their adherents. For gender and sexual minorities, identities have arisen from medicalization, pathologization, community building, fights for inclusion and liberation, erosion of categories, descriptions of personal experiences, and many other factors. Identity categories have responded to social contexts both in broader society and within community structures, and they change reflecting the state of politics and the goals of the communities that utilize them. As such, we cannot understand any identity label as completely fixed or static in its meaning — my own usage of the word queer in this paper to refer broadly to communities of gender and sexual minorities is a product of my current cultural position, the fact that queer has become accepted as a term in the academic study of gender and sexual minorities (the study of which is a cultural paradigm in itself), and for the sake of convenience and brevity.

Queer initially emerged as a pejorative term weaponized against marginalized sexualities, and was reclaimed and reinterpreted within such communities towards the end of the twentieth century as a political signifier towards the deconstruction of gender and sexuality categories, only later to be divorced from its political significance and interpreted by some as a community umbrella label for all gender and sexual minorities. The emergent study of queer theory similarly complicated essentialist understandings of gender and sexuality, and illuminated the socially constructed nature of both concepts. It is within that legacy that I position this study, having demonstrated that the ways in which queer people who have grown up steeped in social media conceptualize their identities in ways that reflect its social construction in online contexts.

Queer communities on social media are noteworthy for their accessibility, diversity, massive scale, and the fact that they enable young people to access boundless information and vocabulary

about identity, as well as support, camaraderie, and affirmation at early stages of their development. Information and terminology found in online queer communities is so often enormously beneficial to adolescents going through the process of parsing their own experiences of gender, sexuality, and attraction that fall outside cisheterosexual hegemonic boundaries, especially for those who do not have access to such information from offline sources. The emergent narrative within much of the extant academic literature regarding identity construction in online queer communities proliferates narratives of the flexibility and opportunities afforded by these networks, and how online communities and the structures of social media sites are used to disrupt hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality. However, this literature does not as often expound on the social sanctioning processes and the strictness with which identity categories are often discussed and mediated within queer communities online.

Worth reiterating is the fact that these discourses are entirely internal to queer communities, in which all participants in these conflicts are in some way members of marginalized communities as gender and sexual minorities. Although these conflicts sometimes mirror issues in the outside world, these are not attacks coming from people or institutions that are actively hostile towards queerness itself. Rather, these conflicts are often perpetuated by well-intentioned queer people at vulnerable stages in their development seeking validation and belonging, immersed in social structures that are concerned with delineating boundaries, with no other access to information or community that might contradict this strict category-focused understandings of queerness.

My participants experienced online queer communities both as generative sites of identity work and as sources of harmful policing around boundaries of queer identity. They found these communities to be focused primarily on identity as topics of discussion, points of commonality,

and as the most socially relevant aspect of individuals' selfhood regarding their presentation and how their views were contextualized. Thus, queer communities online are not only communities organized around commonalities of identity, they are organized predominantly *about* identity itself, which contributed to the heightened salience of identity categories as crucial aspects of selfhood, markers of validity, and determiners of positionality. My participants learned a wide variety of concepts and identity labels online, which were most often understood to be descriptive of specific feelings or life experiences regarding gender and attraction. Although these categories were not necessarily tied to biological or psychological essentialism (though they were in the case of transmedicalism), my participants experienced labeling specificity regarding these categories as sometimes being helpful and sometimes being harmful. Labeling specificity was helpful to participants who wanted language that described their experiences in detailed and nuanced ways, and they did not conceive of it as a limiting factor in their processes of self-discovery — it was a tool that enabled them to accurately parse and communicate their distinct experiences to others. It was harmful for participants who found certain information or social sanctioning processes wrong or invalidating, and for those who became insecure in their own identities or experiences out of a fear of being wrong or not valid. Ultimately, these distinctions and nuances of identity categories mattered so much within peoples' online queer community experiences because identity is the primary focus that connects online queer communities, save for those organized around specific other interests.

This research addresses the social processes of identity construction in queer online communities and how individuals interpret concepts of identity to which they were exposed in these contexts, but this is in no way a complete exploration of the subject. Further research on this topic could more thoroughly compare the ways in which queer individuals who came of age

in online communities differ in their conceptions of identity from those who did only in offline queer communities, and could address the differences in the direct social processes of identity construction and boundary maintenance in online versus offline queer communities. A cross-temporal study of queer people who were exposed to online queer communities and developed their identities therein but later left these contexts in favor of in-person communities would be illuminating. In-depth comparative inquiries into the online mediation and boundary maintenance of different identity categories (comparing, for example, gay identity and trans identity) would illuminate how more specific online sub-communities approach and enact identities and performance differently. Another theme that I did not have the time to address is the disconnect between online-era queer people and direct identity-based political action, despite their strong ties to identity-based communities. Finally, a generational comparison in conceptions of identity between people who came of age before the age of social media and those who came of age within its widespread usage, as I had originally intended for this research, would strengthen this line of inquiry into the particular social processes of identity construction online.

Most of my participants in the online-era cohort have moved away from caring about the distinct meanings of the identity labels they use as much as they did earlier in their development, coinciding with their departure from generalized online queer communities and their increased social bonds with other queer people in offline communities. Given the fact that identities themselves are the most oft-discussed aspect of queerness within online communities, it would follow that individuals seek validation and belonging on the basis of their adherence to specific categories. Identity is not the main focus of other forms of queer community — in other contexts, queer communities can be organized on the basis of interpersonal connection, sexual opportunities, shared space, political action, mutual support, creative endeavors, and so much

more. With an understanding that there is more to queerness than ontological categories of being and the descriptions of individuals' subjective experiences, we can imagine the liberation of finding validity and connection that is untethered from affixing oneself to a categorical label. One's experiences do not need to be categorized to be an authentic expression, and we must be careful not to affirm distinctions that divide us if they do not serve any purpose.

As I conclude this paper, it would be remiss of me not to mention that we are currently amid a political and cultural paradigm in America that is actively seeking to endanger trans people and communities. As more states institute laws that bar trans individuals from obtaining gender-affirming medical care, as notable celebrities espouse hatred for trans people, and as transphobic violence continues to end lives, we cannot afford to mire ourselves in internal conflict over the boundaries of identity. Those who intend us harm justify it on the basis of preserving categorical distinctions of gender and sexuality, and do not care about our internal distinctions of identity and the subjective meanings thereof — only that we deviate from their hegemony. Therefore, our focus should center on disrupting that hegemony concretely and forcefully, and we need not uphold so many categorical distinctions in our own communities when they serve to divide us in the face of such powerful opposition. Our identities need only to catalyze us towards liberation.

Bibliography

Bryson, Mary K. “Virtually Queer: Conjuring the Quotidian” in *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education* 2 no. 4, 2005.

Bryson, Mary, Lori MacIntosh, Sharalyn Jordan, & Hui-Ling Lin. “Virtually Queer? Homing Devices, Mobility, and Un/Belongings.” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 31 no. 4, 2006. doi:10.22230/CJC.2006V31N4A1795.

Byron, Paul, Brady Robards, Benjamin Hanckel, Son Vivienne, & Brendan Churchill. ““Hey, I’m Having These Experiences”: Tumblr Use and Young People’s Queer (Dis)connections” in *International Journal of Communication* 13, 2019.

Cavalcante, Andre. “Tumbling Into Queer Utopias and Vortexes: Experiences of LGBTQ Social Media Users on Tumblr” in *Journal of Homosexuality* 66 no. 12, 2019. doi:10.1080/00918369.2018.1511131.

D’Emilio, John, and Freedman, Estelle. *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America.* Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

D’Emilio, John. “Capitalism and Gay Identity” In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader,* edited by Henry Abalone, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1.* New York, New York: Random House Inc., 1978.

Galvin, Annie. “Ships, Fans, and Beatingthedistance: Queer Intimacy and the New Genre of Interactive Memoir on Tumblr.” In *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, edited by Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein, and Indira Neill Hoch, 201–24. University of Michigan Press, 2020. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.11537055.26.

Gamson, Joshua. “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma.” in *Social Problems* 42 no. 3, 1995. 390–407. https://doi.org/10.2307/3096854.

Halperin, David M. “Is There a History of Sexuality?” In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader,* edited by Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Haimson, Oliver L., Avery Dame-Griff, Elias Capello & Zahari Richter. “Tumblr was a trans technology: the meaning, importance, history, and future of trans technologies.” in *Feminist Media Studies* 21 no. 3, 2021. DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2019.1678505

Hanckel, B. & Chandra, S. *Social Media insights from sexuality and gender diverse young people during COVID-19*. Sydney: Western Sydney University, 2021.

Hanckel, Benjamin & Morris, Alan. "Finding Community and Contesting Heteronormativity: Queer Young People's Engagement in an Australian Online Community" *Journal of Youth Studies* 17 no. 7, 2014. DOI 10.1080/13676261.2013.878792

Hayfield, Nikki, & Karolína Křížová. "It's Like Bisexuality, but It Isn't: Pansexual and Panromantic People's Understandings of Their Identities and Experiences of Becoming Educated about Gender and Sexuality" in *Journal of Bisexuality* 21 no. 2, 2021. doi:10.1080/15299716.2021.1911015

Jacobsen, Kai, Aaron Devor, & Edwin Hodge. "Who Counts as Trans? A Critical Discourse Analysis of Trans Tumblr Posts." in *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 46 no. 1, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1177/01968599211040835

Miles, Sam. "Still Getting It on Online: Thirty Years of Queer Male Spaces Brokered through Digital Technologies." *Geography Compass* 12, no. 11 (2018): e12407. doi:10.1111/GEC3.12407.

Oakley, Abigail. "Disturbing Hegemonic Discourse: Nonbinary Gender and Sexual Orientation Labeling on Tumblr." *Social Media + Society*, 2(3), 2016. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116664217

Renninger, Bryce J. ""Where I can be myself … where I can speak my mind" : Networked counterpublics in a polymedia environment." *New Media & Society* 17, no. 9, 2015. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814530095

Robards, Brady, Brendan Churchill, Son Vivienne, Benjamin Hanckel, & Paul Byron. "Twenty years of 'cyberqueer': the enduring significance of the Internet for young LGBTIQ+ people" in *Youth, Sexuality and Sexual Citizenship.* New York: Routledge, 2019. 10.4324/9781351214742-15.

Robards, Brady, Paul Byron, Brendan Churchill, Benjamin Hanckel, and Son Vivienne. "Tumblr as a Space of Learning, Connecting, and Identity Formation for LGBTIQ+Young People." In *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, edited by Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein, and Indira Neill Hoch, 281–92. University of Michigan Press, 2020. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.11537055.35.

Seidman, Steven. "From Identity to Queer Politics: Shifts in the Social Logic of Normative Heterosexuality in Contemporary America." in *Social Thought & Research* 24 no. 1/2, 2001. 1–12. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23250071.

Turkle, Sherry. "Cyberspace and Identity." *Contemporary Sociology* 28, no. 6 (1999): 643–48. https://doi.org/10.2307/2655534.

Vance, Carol. "Social Construction Theory: Problems in the History of Sexuality." In *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?,* edited by A. Van Kooten Nierkerk and T. Van Der Meer. Amsterdam: An Dekker, 1989.

Walker, Elizabeth M. Mattie. *"I Am Something Else. For Now": Exploring Youth Conversations about Gender Online.* University of Victoria, 2013.

Wakeford, Nina. "New technologies and cyber-queer research". In *Handbook of lesbian and gay studies* edited by D. Richardson & S. Seidman. London: SAGE Publications, 2002.