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Matthew Scheller
Pace University

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Social media and its impact on mental health within the transmasculine community

Matthew Scheller

Applied Psychology & Human Relations

Lindsey Lee

Pforzheimer Honors College

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Abstract

Social media has become an integral part of today's society and many are looking at the effects it may have on one's mental health. In recent years, more information about the transgender community has been discussed, with particular focus on the risks and challenges they face in a society that oppresses them. Much has been discussed about the impacts of social media and how it may be used to foster positive senses of social support and connection with others, particularly for those with marginalized identities, such as those within the LGBTQA community, which may then positively impact mental health outcomes. Given the lack of prior research focusing specifically on transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) individuals and social media, the purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of TGNC individuals within trans-specific groups or communities on social media and the potential impact of these experiences on one's mental health. After conducting individual interviews, results showed that, similar to prior research, participants (n=5) overall reported mostly positive experiences in these trans-specific groups, and stated participation in these spaces had an overall positive impact on their mental health. The major contributing themes for positive experiences included access to advice and education, and feeling supported and validated by peers who share their identity. Most negative experiences participants discussed were not seen as detrimental to their mental health and were manageable to avoid or move past, given the ability to control the content that one engages with on social media.

Introduction & Literature Review

The internet and social media use are an increasingly present aspect of our lives. Time spent refreshing feeds on these platforms is the subject of many debates and studies in order to determine its potential impact on the population, with one model demonstrating a worldwide increase from 90 minutes per day in 2012 to 135 minutes per day in 2017 (GlobalWebIndex, 2017). This rise in time spent online, and specifically on social media platforms, raises the question of potential impacts to spending so much time online, particularly with mental health. What is also increasingly prevalent is the number of individuals, especially youth, identifying as transgender and gender-nonconforming, with a recent study from *Pediatrics* reporting that 2.7% of ninth and eleventh graders are identifying as transgender (Rider, McMorris, Gower, Coleman, & Eisenberg, 2018) compared to 0.6% of United States adults reported in 2016 (Flores, Herman, Gates, & Brown, 2016).

Transgender people (meaning individuals whose gender identity does not align with their sex assigned at birth) and gender nonconforming people (meaning individuals whose gender identity falls outside the typical male-female binary) (TGNC) historically tend to face high levels of discrimination, harassment, and even murder and suicide (Haas, Rodgers, & Herman, 2014). TGNC people also face marginalization from mainstream society as well as from other minority groups like racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities, and tend to lack access to competent and accepting physical and mental health care, especially in more rural areas (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). This extent of marginalization may contribute to feelings of loneliness and isolation, and overall worsen a TGNC person's mental health. According to the 2015 United States Transgender Survey (USTS), TGNC individuals report being in current psychological distress at a rate five times higher than the rate of the United States population, and younger TGNC

individuals reported even higher rates (James, Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet & Anafi, 2016). Additionally, 40% of TGNC people have attempted suicide in their lifetime, a rate that is nearly nine times higher than the national average (James et al., 2016). Support plays an integral role in a TGNC person's quality of life. Individuals whose immediate families were supportive of their gender identity and transition were less likely to report negative experiences such as attempted suicide and psychological distress (James et al., 2016). If a TGNC individual is then able to find support in an online community, they may be able to experience lower levels of psychological distress. TGNC people face extremely high rates of discrimination and harassment, tend to lack access to competent healthcare and mental health services, especially in more rural areas, and overall face much higher rates of psychological distress and attempted suicide than the national average in the United States. Having a source of support surrounding one's gender identity is shown to decrease the level of psychological distress for TGNC people, and an online identity-based community may be able to provide that support. Although social media has the potential for being an added platform for bullying and harassment, especially for the TGNC community, it also could be used to build peer-to-peer support and social connectedness among transgender people, and allow them to learn from one another.

In a 2014 study, Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, and Pettaway focused on the usage of "online information and communication technologies (ICTs)," (Craig et al., 2014) by sexual minority youth and young adults within the context of clinical sexual and mental health application. All participants interviewed utilized social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and all but one used photo or video sharing sites such as Instagram or YouTube. Findings demonstrated that social experiences offline generate more fear in participants than in online experiences, particularly with transgender identifying individuals, and that these online

ICTs help in facilitating connection by engaging in activities that were specific to their individual sexual or gender identity (Craig et al., 2014). Participants felt that their online interactions on these ICTs offered greater safety than offline social interactions, where they would be more likely to experience risks such as violence, victimization, and isolation related to their sexual or gender identity (Craig et al., 2014). The potential risks that are typically noted within research regarding online interactions, such as cyberbullying and online predators, were only ever mentioned in the context of comparing them to their offline interactions, which participants considered to be less safe (Craig et al., 2014). The usage of online ICTs aided in facilitating connection with other sexual and gender minority youth and young adults by the ability to openly express their true identities, thoughts, and opinions, being able to seek out similar others, and again emphasizing the potential benefits of online anonymity with regards to safety both on and offline (Craig et al., 2014). With LGBTQA youth and young adults characterizing their experiences on social media platforms as generally safer than offline interactions, as well as noting the benefits of building connection and genuine self-expression that are provided in online communities, TGNC individuals specifically may feel safer interacting with others online and may feel more connected to the transgender community through such means of interaction and expression.

When it comes to self-expression on social media, recent research suggests that “an individual’s true self may be more readily expressed on Facebook than in person,” (Grieve & Watkinson, 2016) and was investigated within the context of the possible psychological benefits to being one’s authentic self via Facebook. Grieve and Watkinson administered a personality assessment to 164 participants, and asked them to complete it once as their true self, and once as the self they present on Facebook, along with “measures of social connectedness, subjective

well-being, depression, anxiety, and stress,” (Grieve & Watkinson, 2016). According to their findings, the greater the coherence between one’s true self and Facebook self, the greater the sense of social connectedness, as well as less stress that an individual may experience (Grieve & Watkinson, 2016). By expressing one’s true self on Facebook, one may feel more connected socially to the friends one has on their profile and potentially connect with others who may share similar aspects of their identity. If a transgender person is able to present as their authentic self on social media platforms, then they too may have the potential for a greater sense of social connectedness and decreased stress.

When it comes to Facebook use specifically, however, some findings suggest that Facebook may not be the friendliest site for those in the LGBTQA community, especially for those of color. Cho (2017) spent five years conducting cyberethnographic research with LGBTQA Tumblr users investigating their motives behind their preference for Tumblr over Facebook as a social media platform, and according to his results, it is the design of the site that enforces “default publicness.” Cho explains how Facebook is designed in a way where its forms of “valid” means of identifying oneself is rooted only in what is validated by a systemically white supremacist, homophobic nation (Cho, 2017). Its post archive is highly accessible, and allows for the possibility of posting one’s actions without knowing. These design factors can lead to dangerous consequences for individuals with marginalized identities, especially those with multiple intersecting marginal identities (Cho, 2017). This bias towards default publicness in Facebook’s design assumes that being in the public eye carries no risk and that everyone is treated equally under informal social policing, which is not the case when the centuries of legislation in this nation have systematically benefitted white, straight, cisgender men over anyone else (Cho, 2017). Participants in this study noted the benefits of Tumblr’s more lenient

administrative decisions and design choices that allow for more free and creative expression that allow queer youth and young adults of color to express themselves and their identities more freely without as much fear of being surveilled or in some cases potentially being outed to families who are not accepting of LGBTQA identities (Cho, 2017). Some participants responded that they had been disowned and financially cut off from their families because their LGBTQA identity was revealed to them in some fashion, demonstrating the very real dangers that LGBTQA people, especially those of color, face when default publicness is at work (Cho, 2017). The findings of this study reveal the very real consequences of being an LGBTQA identified person, particularly a queer or TGNC person of color, in a nation where multiple aspects of one's identity are systematically marginalized and where one's personal thoughts, opinions, actions, and identities can be accessed, shared, and surveilled easily, and where default publicness is embedded into most online social media platforms. Despite some sites being less friendly to marginalized identities than others, queer youth and young adults of color are still able to foster connection and express themselves and their identities unapologetically through sites that may inherently allow for more free and creative expression, particularly with regard to *specifically* those marginalized identities one holds.

Increased connectedness, as well as free and open expression of one's identity could extend into online communities centered on a specific aspect of oneself. According to recent findings, social networking sites are increasingly being used for peer-to-peer support in self-forming communities (Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch, & Bartels, 2016). The researchers proposed a conceptual model to demonstrate the potential benefits of such online peer-to-peer connections. These online support communities were for individuals with various mental illnesses, and these communities were able to provide its members with feelings of group

belonging, greater social connectedness, and learn different coping strategies from each other (Naslund et al., 2016). By learning from each other, they could “gain insight about important health care decisions,” which could encourage them to seek mental health care (Naslund et al., 2016). They could also access mental health interventions via social media that “could incorporate mutual support between peers, help promote treatment engagement and reach a wider demographic,” (Naslund et al., 2016). Such online communities described in this study seem to mirror those specific accounts, pages, and spaces throughout social media platforms which may exist for TGNC individuals, and could provide a general understanding of the potential benefits for participating in those groups.

The ability to engage in identity-specific spaces may be a way for individuals to learn how to contextualize and manage their identities. Involvement in these types of online communities provides a number of areas of personal growth for LGBTQA college students with disabilities, as Ryan Miller found in his study. He interviewed 25 undergraduate and graduate level students who identified as LGBTQA (6 identified as TGNC in some way) and differently abled in some way. His results demonstrated that students were able to find validation, become involved in, and contextually manage their various identities by engaging in such identity-specific online communities (Miller, 2017). This study provides additional support to the idea that TGNC people may be able to find validation and build community, as well as find support through involvement in online communities centered on or around transgender identity.

Identity-based social media community interaction can also provide a sense of peer-to-peer education and learning. Fox and Ralston (2016) interviewed 33 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and otherwise identified (LGBTQ) individuals and found that there were 3 types of learning that these LGBTQ youth engage in online: traditional learning, social

learning, and experiential learning, and individuals whose identities are less common (transgender) are more likely to teach others about it (Fox & Ralston, 2016). By teaching and learning from others who may share a sexual or gender identity, the potential for social connectedness and other positive psychological outcomes could be increased.

Ybarra, Mitchell, Palmer and Reisner (2015) utilized data from the Teen Health and Technology study from August 2010 and January 2011, comprised of 5,542 U.S. adolescents, and looked specifically for instances of online and in-person peer victimization and sexual victimization (Ybarra et al., 2015). The researchers found that LGBTQ youth were more likely than their non-LGBTQ peers to have online friends and say that their online friends provided better emotional support than in person friends (Ybarra et al., 2015). They believe that this online support could function as a learning platform for dealing with victimization, as well as a means of coping and catharsis in those situations (Ybarra et al., 2015). These findings resemble those of Naslund et al., with this online support promoting potentially healthier or more effective ways to cope with stressors one faces as an LGBTQ person today as similar to the kinds of learning and promoting of positive mental health seeking behaviors in online mental illness communities.

Utilizing social networking sites actively (posting content, commenting on posts, interacting with others) as well as using these sites in more sexual-identity specific frames rather than one's whole identity in general (ex.: blogging about one's sexuality, music interests, mental health, and hometown all at once) is an important distinction which tends to foster better mental health outcomes and social support, a conclusion Ceglarek and Ward (2016) make when they looked at social media use of sexual minority and heterosexual youth (Ceglarek & Ward, 2016). They surveyed 146 sexual minority youth (LGB) and 477 heterosexual youth. Both groups used social networking sites at the same rates, but the purposes behind such use differed, since the

sexual minority youth cited their reasoning behind such use as “for identity development and social communication” compared to their heterosexual peers (Ceglarek & Ward, 2016).

Although they only looked at sexuality as the specific minority identity, they contend that their findings can be extended to other youth minority groups (such as transgender youth) to predict mental health outcomes based on their social media use (Ceglarek & Ward, 2016). This active use of social media for a specific aspect of one's life seems to align with the type of social media use Naslund et al. found to be effective at generating peer-to-peer support. If a transgender person was to post original content, and ask and answer questions about being transgender in an online community specifically centered around one's transgender identity, one could suppose that, based on these findings, such trans individuals could experience a greater sense of social support and potentially less depression or anxiety than if they were not active in such a group.

Taking into consideration the wide range of results in previous studies conducted with regard to social media usage and mental health, with some stating a negative impact and others stating a more positive impact, Berryman, Ferguson, and Negy (2017) conducted a study designed to look at the correlation between time spent on social media, importance of social media in one's life, and the tendency to engage in “vaguebooking,” which the researchers describe as “posting unclear but alarming sounding posts to get attention,” (p. 1). Results demonstrated that time spent on social media and how important it is in one's life show no correlation to one's mental health, however the more one tended to engage in vaguebooking, the higher their reported rates of loneliness and suicidal thoughts (Berryman, Ferguson, & Negy, 2017). Results also show that parent/child conflict was a stronger predictor of mental health outcomes than social media use, and the greater one's sense of social support, the greater protective factor it has on one's mental health (Berryman, Ferguson, & Negy, 2017). The

researchers note that the emphasis be placed on how one uses social media and not the length of time spent on it when considering mental health outcomes, and that vaguebooking may be utilized as a form of a cry for help for those with preexisting mental health conditions (Berryman, Ferguson, & Negy, 2017). Knowing that TGNC individuals tend to lack access to competent and supportive mental health care and may have greater levels of parent/child conflict due to potential lack of parental support regarding one's gender identity, the higher sense of perceived social support found with online interactions and connections among LGBTQA young people leads hope to the idea that despite the numerous factors working against TGNC individuals and their mental health outcomes, social media usage still provides the possibility of social support and therefore still may provide positive mental health outcomes.

Because of the potential for social media being a source of support and learning for those in the LGBTQ community (McConnell, Clifford, Korpak, Phillips II & Birkett, 2017; Miller, 2017; Ceglarek & Ward, 2016; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Ybarra, Mitchell, Palmer & Reisner, 2015; Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, & Pettaway, 2014) mental health professionals are recommending platforms on social media to their transgender and gender nonconforming clients. Such recommendations come from the belief that involvement in social media platforms can improve a transgender person's mental health because they would be able to freely express their identities, thoughts, and opinions, meet new people in the transgender community, gain their support, and learn from others who share their experiences. I have been involved in online transgender specific communities across numerous platforms over the course of the past five years, which includes numerous closed Facebook groups for transgender identifying individuals, some even more specifically for transmasculine identifying individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB), as well as groups for specific topics regarding medical transition (hormone replacement

therapy, gender confirmation surgeries, etc.). I know I am not the only one involved in these groups, since many of them include thousands of people each, and one specifically includes over 14,000 transmasculine AFAB individuals. On other platforms, I have also been able to follow and connect with hundreds and potentially even thousands of other TGNC people, learn more about the processes of medically and legally transitioning, and learn about various companies and organizations that offer products to help alleviate gender dysphoria.

After being involved in the online TGNC community in such a way, as well as looking at prior research, one may wonder if such online communities are effective at providing social support, and if participation in transgender-specific circles on social media would consequently positively impact one's mental health. Based on previous findings, it is proposed that the more an individual actively participates in such online communities (creating posts, commenting on others' posts, interacting with other members), the greater one's perceived sense of peer-to-peer support and positive mental health (decreased levels of reported anxiety and depression). The central question of how a TGNC person's usage of social media may impact their mental health would be the focus of this study.

Methods

In order to study the levels of social media usage, which platforms are preferred, how connected one is to the online TGNC community, the kinds of experiences an individual has within these communities, and the potential impacts these experiences have on one's mental health, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals willing to voluntarily participate.

Participants

Individuals eligible to be interviewed were above the age of 18, self-identified as transgender or gender nonconforming, and were involved in the online TGNC community. The sample of participants in this study (n= 5) range in age from 21-23, and are all individuals of transmasculine experience in some capacity. The specific gender identities that participants label themselves as include “transgender man/F to M,” “genderqueer transmasculine,” “nonbinary,” and “male.” Regarding ethnicity, 2 participants identified as White, and 3 identified as Black/African-American. All participants have been using social media for at least the last 7 years and, at most, more than 10 years. All participants are out in regards to their gender identity on all of their social media accounts, and are involved in trans-specific groups or communities on social media in some way.

Procedure

Information about a call for interview participants was posted on Facebook and Twitter, including multiple transgender-specific Facebook support groups. Some snowball sampling was also used. Participants were instructed to contact the researcher if they were interested in being interviewed, and then were sent a digital copy of the informed consent document to be filled out. Once the researcher confirmed receipt of the participants affirmative consent to be interviewed and to have the interview audio recorded, the researcher worked to schedule a time with the participants to conduct each individual interview. Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed. On average, the duration of each interview was about 8 minutes, and no more than 10 minutes. Participants are referred to using pseudonyms in order to provide necessary confidentiality and protect their identity. Demographic information collected included age, race, gender identity, and pronouns used. In addition, the names of specific Facebook groups mentioned were also altered in order to maintain confidentiality and protect the identities of

those group members. Interview questions were formatted to assess one's level of engagement on social media, within TGNC-specific online communities, what kinds of experiences participants have on those platforms within those communities, if they are out about their gender identity online, and if they experienced any positive or negative impacts on their mental health by participating in these trans-specific communities. Interview responses were analyzed with regard to any emerging themes or similarities.

Results

While both positive and negative experiences were discussed, overall, participants expressed feeling more of a positive impact on their mental health by engaging in transgender specific groups or communities on social media, and reported more positive experiences than negative when engaging. These positive experiences were not relegated to engagement in one specific platform over any others, since different participants had more of a preference for one or two platforms over the others which they may have accounts on, and not all were active in the same kinds of groups or spaces on social media. For example, Cameron and Aaron tended to be more active on Facebook and described the numerous trans-specific Facebook support groups they engaged with regularly, whereas Jared, Jayden, and Marcus were more active on Twitter and Instagram where they were part of trans-specific communities on those platforms, or simply followed many other transgender individuals rather than be directly involved with a specific support group. The amount of time spent engaging in these trans-specific spaces also does not appear to be a significant factor in determining the likelihood of positive impacts or experiences. Participants reported a range of time spent engaging in these spaces, from hardly any time per week to as much as 6 hours per week.

Based on participants' responses to interview questions, a few themes emerged regarding potential reasons for feeling positive impacts on one's mental health and having positive experiences engaging in these trans-specific communities. These themes are: access to advice and education, and connectedness with and support from others of the same or similar identities.

Access to advice and education

One of the most common themes among participants' responses as to what aspects of these communities they felt are part of the reasons they felt a positive impact on their mental health is the amount of access to advice and education on many aspects of the transgender, or more specifically transmasculine, experience.

Social media is one of the first places transgender individuals may choose to come out in regards to their gender identity, as was the case for 22-year old Jared. For him, social media was the first place he learned what it means to be nonbinary and transgender, and he stated that he learned a lot of new information through the interactions he had in these groups or communities. For other individuals, like 23-year old Cameron, these spaces offer more of an opportunity for him to offer advice to others earlier on in their journeys. "I found a lot of these communities after I was pretty well-established in my transition, so I was more of like a resource than as somebody who's like, asking for information," he explains. Cameron also expressed how being able to take on this mentor-like role in these online communities is positive for him, because he would not have the opportunity to be in this role otherwise. He says that "it's nice to be able to do that because I don't really have a lot of connections to the in-person communities around my city to kind of take on a mentorship."

Individuals may give or receive advice on a wide range of topics related to the transmasculine experience, such as coming out, how to ask for someone to treat one better

regarding one's trans identity, trans-friendly employment opportunities, how to get through a rough time mentally, and asking for tips, education, or experiences regarding any aspects of medical transition, as were the topics that Aaron, Jayden, and Marcus described where they either received advice or saw advice being given. "I find that seeing other people's experiences and seeing their opinions and viewpoints of how to deal with it, manage it, it's been really helpful" says Marcus, "[be]cause I'm like 'oh, I never thought about this before,' or like, '...I haven't adopted this as part of my philosophy before,' 'oh wow, this makes sense.' It's like, having an older brother at times, an older sibling." Being able to learn new information from others within the transgender or specifically transmasculine community allows for this mentor, or even sibling-like in Marcus's case, relationship to develop. Since not all transgender individuals are exactly the same or have exactly the same interests, life experiences, or viewpoints, these groups and communities may contain a wide array of individuals with different experiences and advice to offer, and allow individuals access to other stories and narratives about what it may mean to be transmasculine.

Connectedness and Support

Feeling connected, supported, and validated by others within the trans community is one of the other major themes behind the positive impact participants felt by participating in these groups.

Cameron appreciates the level of inclusivity for all kinds of transmasculine people, which groups are increasingly mindful of. Though not all groups are perfect, since he says "I do feel like there's a lot of pressure to um, be as masculine as you can," he explains "I just like it when groups like, clarify that like, 'hey you don't have to do that' and there are cis men that, cis straight men even, that uh, do drag and stuff and you don't have to like hate yourself for the

things you like.” These groups that avoid gatekeeping of what it means to be transmasculine are the groups where Cameron feels the most supported. One of these particular groups is Trans Brothers, which has tens of thousands of transmasculine and AFAB nonbinary individuals. He explains, “Trans Brothers just like, gives you a chance to like, post pictures of yourself, or um, just like, be your authentic self with no judgement, which is really nice. Especially for people who probably aren’t out of the closet yet.” Being able to post pictures of oneself when they feel confident, especially if they would not have the ability to post that picture elsewhere, and be able to receive positive affirmations and validation is an important aspect of the support provided in these communities. For Jared, being able to receive this kind of validation is incredibly valuable, as he reveals, “if you post something, and people are like affirming you, and saying like ‘yeah!’ ‘I’m proud of you,’ like, that’s also really great too.” Social media was the first place Jared learned what it means to be transgender and where he “met other people who also identified similarly,” and feeling so uplifted and supported for him is “very, very, very, very, very positive.” He explains, “before I came to college, that’s probably where I got most of the support.”

Even being involved in smaller, more specific, and occasionally tight-knit communities still yields meaningful support, as 21 year old Jayden explains. Being closely connected online with the other black trans men in his local area has helped him feel more supported. “I do know that we’re all pretty supportive of one another, or at least try to be. So I don’t think I’ve ever not felt supported,” he states. In bigger online groups with people from all over the world, or smaller groups of people with one’s same identities in one’s local area, participants still reported feeling supported.

An advantage of social media and its general functions is the ability to curate one's feed to be able to see what one actually wants to see. This is one of the reasons Marcus says he feels a positive impact on his mental health from his social media activity. "I feel like people who I follow specifically do not ascribe to like, Western beauty standards and certain ideologies," he says. "[A]lmost everyone I follow, I like, try to make sure they fit into like, what I want to see, so like, following a lot of people being like, who are overweight or are considered fat by society, people who have different levels of ability, like, people with different skill sets," Marcus explains. Following individuals who share aspects of his identity, like as well as individuals who hold different identities that use their platforms to educate others help him to have a more positive experience on social media. Marcus also feels supported by the individuals who he receives advice from. Within those sibling-like mentorship relationships he says he feels the most supported.

Knowing that there are other individuals readily available to reach out to who may have gone through the same experiences or felt the same way you feel is helpful for Jayden, as he explains, "you know that people exist that you could talk to, and you're not alone, and like, just knowing that there's, you know, a group of people that you could actually go and like, reach out to and potentially talk to that's like, yeah that's like, worth a lot." Having a group of other transmasculine people to talk to about one's experiences and concerns is one of the main positive impacts on one's mental health that participants cited.

Negative Experiences and How to Cope

While participants had overwhelmingly positive experiences within these trans-specific groups and communities, there are some negative experiences that they each described, and they

all have various ways of coping with them in order to minimize their potential impacts on mental health.

Occasionally group members will be in such a dark place mentally that one can be brought down into a more dark place themselves, as was the case for Cameron in some cases. He explained, "sometimes I will find people who are so deep in their own depression holes that it drags me down a little bit too, um, but, um, it's not like, anything anybody's intentionally doing something, it's, it's just that they're struggling so much that I end up empathizing and falling into that pit a little bit." While he understands that these effects are not necessarily intentional, he will still feel dragged down on occasion when he offers help or advice to someone who may be in too deep, because he can understand what that person may be feeling or going through in that moment and feel down. Despite these more negative instances, he still generally feels that these impacts for him have for the most part been neutral.

Another negative Cameron describes, and a potential point of improvement for these groups or communities, is being better about vetting information that gets posted and offered by individuals in these spaces. "I've seen individuals who kind of just, take all the advice and accept it as written law, and that's not always correct, and not always great." He clarifies this by stating that "this gets a little more into like, more fitness-style stuff than necessarily like, really important situations." Having as accurate information being spread as possible is important for trans individuals to be informed, especially in regards to any potential medical transition-related information.

It is not uncommon for those with marginalized identities to internalize the prejudices against them, and bearing witness to someone's internalized transphobia, or even being the subject of it, are some of the negative experiences discussed by Jayden and Aaron. For Jayden,

the groups he is in he will occasionally see “that one trans person that’s like, internalized a bunch of shit, and decides to take it out on other people.” Some of these internalized beliefs are taken out on nonbinary people, as Jayden mentions, “I know there’s like a lot of nonbinary bashing happening within trans groups a lot.” While Jayden himself says has never been the subject of this internalized transphobia, Aaron recalls the times he has received backlash potentially as a result of internalized transphobia. Certain groups employ more gatekeeping than others in terms of who is “trans enough” or “masculine enough” and those who do not fit into those categories may be subject to harassment. Aaron describes one instance, where “one person intentionally called me um, you know, misgendered me because we were arguing, um, and like, it wasn’t like the kind of group where you could tag an admin and they would get that person removed,” and another time where he “had this one person say ‘you’re acting very uh, single female right now,’ about something that I said, which was really offensive.” Individuals who do not strictly conform to binary masculine standards may face more harassment both from outside the community and within, and while these negative experiences very much stood out to Aaron, he also explains that the groups where he received treatment such as this, he is no longer a part of. In a similar way that Marcus describes how he curates the content he sees and is intentional about who he follows on social media, Aaron describes the ability and choice he made to leave the groups where he did not feel supported or safe to express his true self. Being able to remove himself from those negative atmospheres and choose to participate in ones where he felt more validated and supported in his authentic identity contributed to his feelings that the positive impacts of these groups have outweighed the negative experiences he recalls.

Having multiple marginalized identities lead to some negative experiences on social media, particularly for Jared, as he describes his experience of being both Black and nonbinary,

particularly within these communities on social media. He explains that he has seen racism within the trans community, as well as nonbinary erasure or gatekeeping on the right way to be trans. Jared notes, however that these instances of racism or gatekeeping “have never been things that are like, personal, but more so...disheartening or disappointing.” Jared’s experiences are similar to Jayden’s in that they both acknowledge seeing nonbinary erasure and racism in an indirect way in the trans community, which strikes a personal chord with them given they both are Black and transgender. Jayden in particular describes a lot of the larger groups he has been a part of as being “very white,” so he explains that he does not participate or look at those groups very often because, as he says, “I see enough white people in my day to day, I don’t need to go seek them out on social media.” Jayden is curating what he sees and what he chooses to participate in on social media as well, because he feels more validated, affirmed, and supported by interacting with other trans people of color who may better understand and relate to his story and experiences than white trans people. He is choosing to avoid groups where racism could be encountered, and even if this racism is not directed specifically towards him, it can still have a negative impact on him as a Black trans man. Jayden chooses to avoid these potentially negative or even harmful situations by not participating in those groups where they may be encountered, and puts his time and energy into interacting in groups where he knows he feels supported.

The posts which others make in these groups or communities may spark some negative thoughts or beliefs about oneself or one’s transition, as Marcus and Jared both describe in their own ways. For Marcus, seeing negative comments or feedback on individuals surgical results is disheartening, and fuels a fear that those negative comments may be directed at him one day. He describes times where he has seen someone “post a picture like, post-surgery, where like people would say like, very degrading things like, ‘oh, your surgeon did a bad job,’ or ‘it doesn’t look

good,' or "you don't look trans enough,'" and seeing these kinds of comments were "really really like, jarring to see and really negative because...now I'm scared that someone is gonna think that when I get this done in the way that they wouldn't like it to be done that it looks bad." Marcus understands that every individual has a different expectation or desire for their surgical outcome with their body, and seeing these negative comments makes him feel self-conscious that what he may want for his chest to look like after surgery is going to be perceived as bad. For him, this fear is to a point where it makes him "more anxious to like, interact with my own community in a way." The ways that Jared's feelings of being self-conscious about his transition manifested as slight feelings of jealousy when seeing other trans individuals posting pictures or updates who may be further along in their transitions. Jared explains this feeling when he says "you're transitioning, and everyone's transition is different, and you're like 'dang, I want to be there.'" He is also able to understand that for him, this is a result of having "access to people doing different things, and being on different levels," which "makes you think about yourself more often." These instances where he finds himself thinking these thoughts are never to a point where he finds it having a significant negative impact on his mental health, however, and his experiences are still overall very much positive.

While participants described some negative experiences they encountered within these trans-specific communities, they all seem to consider most of these experiences as rare and do not define their whole experience interacting in these spaces. They highlight how many of these negatives can be minimized by being intentional with the kinds of groups or individuals that one chooses to interact with on social media, ensuring that one's time and energy are spent in spaces that feel affirming and validating for them and their identity, which may lead to more positive experiences overall.

Discussion

Results seem to be consistent with previous research, (McConnell, Clifford, Korpak, Phillips II & Birkett, 2017; Miller, 2017; Ceglarek & Ward, 2016; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Ybarra, Mitchell, Palmer & Reisner, 2015; Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, & Pettaway, 2014) with involvement in identity-specific communities having an overall mostly positive impact on participants mental health. Access to advice and education from peers with the same or similar identities were one of the main factors in participants' positive experiences in these communities, which aligns with Fox & Ralston's (2016) results with peer-to-peer education and learning from one another being a primary use of these spaces for participants, particularly relevant to Cameron's role within these groups as more of a mentor. As he tends to be the one providing advice and education in the groups he participates in, as well as running his own trans resource blog on Tumblr, his contributions most directly relate to the functions of peer-to-peer education within identity-based groups as outlined by Fox & Ralston's results.

All participants reported feeling supported by others within these trans-specific groups and communities. Some participants expressed that they do not have much in-person support from other trans individuals, such as Cameron, and access to these online communities has provided participants with a way to meet other trans individuals who may share similar experiences and be able to support them in that way. These aspects of support relate to the support highlighted in previous research (Miller, 2017; Ceglarek & Ward, 2016; Naslund et al., 2016; Ybarra et al., 2015) and the level of support participants received noted it as one of the aspects that contributed to their positive experiences in these groups.

The sites preferred by participants also aligns somewhat with the trends that Cho's (2017) findings demonstrated, since the participants of color used Facebook less frequently or hardly at

all as opposed to white participants who said they were much more active on Facebook than other sites.

While being involved in these identity-specific communities had an overall positive impact on participants, there were still possibilities and instances of negative experiences. However, participants were able to manage these negative experiences and minimize their impacts by leaving or not participating in spaces where these negative experiences were occurring, or were able to recognize these negative instances as minor compared to other experiences on social media or in life they may have had. Previous research highlights the many risks transgender individuals face in today's society (James et al., 2016) and while the negative experiences participants endured have potential to be harmful, when placed in the greater context of risks that they face in their everyday lives as transgender individuals, and trans people of color, these negative experiences seem relatively minimal and manageable.

These results seem to support the previous existing research that active engagement in specific communities on social media, particularly as a person with a marginalized identity, one is able to receive support, education, and have an overall positive impact on one's mental health. However, these results are limited in their scope. With a sample size of five participants, all of whom identify as transmasculine in some way, a greater sample size and inclusion of transfeminine experiences would be more ideal to get an even better insight into the impact of these online communities on trans individuals' mental health. Since transfeminine individuals historically tend to face more discrimination and harassment in society (James et al., 2016) their experiences within these online communities may be different than these transmasculine participants. All participants were also out about their gender identity on their social media, so results may also differ with individuals who may not have the ability to be out on social media

for their own safety. These participants were also all young adults in their early twenties, and participation in these online groups or communities may have a different impact among other age groups. Further research may be able to more closely look at the different areas TGNC individuals may feel supported, and what they seek in terms of education or advice and how this relates to participants' positive or negative experiences and relation to mental health. A more in-depth focus on the impact of the ways participation in these communities affect TGNC individuals' mental health is also needed in order to better understand the true extent of this impact. Given the methods participants took to manage what they chose to participate in or who they followed on their social media accounts and the potential impacts that had on minimizing negative experiences, more research into the impacts of the kinds of content an individual engages with on social media and those impacts on one's mental health would also be necessary to better understand how much of an impact this action may have on one's social media experiences overall.

Conclusion

For transmasculine young adults, participation and involvement in trans-specific groups or communities on social media had an overall positive impact on their mental health, and they reported a majority positive experiences interacting within these spaces online. Some of the major themes contributing to these positive experiences were access to advice and education, as well as support and validation from others who share the same or similar identities. Any negative experiences reported within these groups or communities was not seen as detrimental to participants' mental health, and most participants were able to avoid or remove themselves from these negative spaces. Having the ability to control what spaces they wanted to participate in and

what content they want to see was a significant factor in limiting participants' negative experiences.

Further research would be concerned with transfeminine experiences on social media and the impact on their mental health, as well as other age groups and those who are not out about their gender identity. A closer look at the underlying reasons for these positive impacts these groups or communities have on a TGNC individual's mental health, as well as the role that controlling the content and groups one sees or participates in, would be important to gain an even greater understanding of the ways social media may be used to foster positive mental health outcomes, support, and education for a marginalized community.

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Appendix

Table 1: Demographic information

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Gender Identity	Pronouns
Cameron	23	Caucasian/White	Transgender man/ "F to M"	he/him/his
Aaron	23	White	Genderqueer transmasculine	he/him/his
Jared	22	Black/African- American	Nonbinary	he/him/his
Jayden	21	Black	Male	he/him/his
Marcus	22	Black	transmasculine	he/him/his

Table 2: Social Media Usage Information

Pseudonym	Length on social media	Platforms most used	Time per day	Out on social media	In trans groups/communities	Time per week
Cameron	10+ yrs	Facebook, Discord, Snapchat	8 hrs	Yes	Yes	5-6hrs
Aaron	7 yrs	Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube	6 hrs	Yes	Yes	2hrs
Jared	9 yrs	Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr	2 hrs	Yes	Yes	2hrs
Jayden	11 yrs	Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr	8-10 hrs	Yes	Yes	"Not very often"
Marcus	10 yrs	Instagram, Twitter, Facebook	At least 1 hr	Yes	Not specifically, follows individual trans people & is in queer specific groups on Facebook	N/A

Interview 1: Cameron

Interviewer (I): Ok, alright, so, just kind of like, starting of as some baseline kind of questions, do you mind just stating your age, race, how you describe your gender identity, and what pronouns you use?

Participant (P): Yeah, so my name is Cameron*, I'm 23 years old, caucasian, and I identify as a transgender man, or F to M, and I use he/him/his pronouns.

I: Ok, awesome, thanks. So, next, how long would you say that you've been using social media?

P: Well, I had a MySpace page *laughter* so, a long time. That was probably, 5th or 6th grade, so, dear lord, probably upwards of 10 years.

I: Ok cool, and, which social media platforms do you currently use?

P: I currently use Facebook, Discord, which I consider social media, Snapchat, I have an Instagram and a Twitter but I dont usually use them, and i think that's- oh, i have a Tumblr but Tumblr died a little while ago so...

I: Yeah *laughter* so, how much time would you say you spend on social media per day?

P: Uh, too much? *laughter* Probably, I would not be surprised if it came out to be about 8 hours a day in spurts.

I: Alright, and are you out about your gender identity on your social media accounts?

P: Yes.

I: Ok, are you a part of any trans-specific groups or communities on social media platforms?

P: Yes, I am a part of I think 3 different F to M groups on Facebook, I run a trans resource blog on Tumblr, and, yeah, that would pretty much be it.

I: Ok, cool, so how much time do you say you would spend being involved in these kinds of communities per week?

P: Per week? Um, probably about 5 to 6 hours a week at least, maybe more.

I: Ok, what have your experiences been like interacting with these communities on social media?

P: Mostly positive, I found a lot of these communities after I was pretty well-established in my transition, so I was more of like a resource than as somebody who's like, asking for information. But, so, it's nice to be able to do that because I don't really, have a lot of connections to the in person communities around my city to kind of take on a mentorship, but being able to do that online is pretty positive for me.

I: Yeah, that's awesome. Have you had any negative experiences that you could think of? Or is it still just mostly positive?

P: In trans specific communities? No, I can't think of any. Like, I've had a few in random comment sections but not in trans-specific, not even in LGBT-specific [groups].

I: Ok, cool, and I know you said you run a trans resource blog and stuff like that, that's really cool, um, so, how do you engage in these communities on social media? Do you post like, direct original content, like, making your own posts in these, you know, different communities, or do you mostly just kind of scroll through passively?

P: So, in, on the Facebook groups, I usually just scroll through and comment on other people's posts, but all of my content is usually original. For my resource blog, it's all original content, except for like, a couple articles that I'll share that are just like, "they said this better than I could possibly try to," yeah. But that's- its basically, so Facebook I don't usually post- I'm not usually the original poster, but all of my content is original if that makes sense.

I: That's cool, so have you ever felt supported by others in these, uh, trans-specific communities?

P: Um, yes? Though it's not necessarily something I'm looking for. But, yeah, it's, yeah.

I: Ok, cool. And, has engaging in these communities on social media helped or hurt your mental health in any way?

P: Um, it's mostly neutral. There has been a little bit of negative effects just sometimes I will find people who are so deep in their own depression holes that it drags me down a little bit too, um, but, um, it's not like, anything anybody's intentionally doing something, it's, it's just that they're struggling so much that I end up empathizing and falling into that pit a little bit, and, yeah.

I: Yeah, that's definitely understandable, especially [in] the role that you tend to play too, and, alright, yeah, so that's pretty much all the questions that I have written down. Um, if there's anything else that you want to add onto or or talk about, you know, feel free, uh, but yeah.

P: There's not really anything that comes to mind, I think it's great that we have the means of like, communication across social media to sort of get questions answered and whatnot, but it can also be kind of a little bit detrimental sometimes, because there's so much information and not all of it's vetted, so you never know, like, I've seen individuals who kind of just, take all the advice and accept it as written law, and that's not always correct, and not always great, granted this gets a little more into like, more fitness-style stuff than necessarily like, really important situations. But, it's one of those things that it's great that you have so much access to information and other individuals and support and all that, it just, sometimes becomes too much, and I know

that if I was in that, like, if I had the access to what I have today when I was, like, 16-17-18, it would, probably be somewhat detrimental to myself.

I: Ok, so, are there any other questions you might have for me about anything?

P: Um, no, not really.

I: Ok, cool, well, thank you so much for being willing to talk to me and everything, and for, you know, um, all of your great answers and everything. And, yeah. If you're interested in kind of like, seeing my results and stuff after I've like, fully written everything up, definitely just like, let me know and I'll like, send a copy or something like that over if you're interested at all, but other than that, thanks so much for talking to me, and I hope you have a great day.

Interview 2: Aaron

Interviewer (I): Alrighty, so, just to kind of start off, do you mind just stating your age, race, what you describe your gender identity as, and what pronouns you use?

Participant (P): Uh, yeah, I'm 23, i'm white, I use he/him, and I'm genderqueer transmasculine.

I: Ok, cool. Next, so, how long have you been using social media?

P: Since 2012

I: Ok, cool. And which social media platforms do you use?

P: Um, I use Snapchat, I use Facebook, I use Instagram, and Pinterest, and YouTube.

I: Ok, cool. And how much time would you say you spend on social media per day?

P: I want to say, like, 6 hours?

I: Ok, *laughter* and are you out about your gender identity on your social media accounts?

P: Yes.

I: Ok, cool. And are you a part of any trans-specific groups or communities on social media platforms?

P: Yes.

I: Alright. Which platforms are you primarily in those communities on?

P: Um, I am on FTM Brotherhood*, Non-binary social space*, and then, I also have my own, it's called trans life and art* that I made like 4 years ago, and, uh, I feel like there's more. I can't remember any others.

I: That's ok. So, how much time would you say you spend in these, you know, interacting in these communities per week?

P: Um, probably about 2 hours a week.

I: Ok. And what have your experiences been like interacting in these communities on social media?

P: Mostly positive.

I: Ok. Have you had any negative experiences that you can think of?

P: Yes.

I: Ok. Anything you would want to say about that or no?

P: Yeah, um, there were a lot like, Trans Brothers* is better, but there are a lot of um, groups that I was in that were very um, ugh, gate-keep-y I guess. Like, I also had people that would just like, insult me for not like, even if I hadn't really made a stance, you know? Like they'd be like, they'd just say something about um, my transition or how I wasn't like, like, one person intentionally called me um, you know, misgendered me because we were arguing, um, and like, it wasn't like the kind of group where you could tag an admin and they would get that person removed. And there's like, a lot of people that they all, they'll use your assigned gender to kind of control your opinion, like I had this one person say "you're acting very uh, single female right now," about something that I said which was really offensive. Um, yeah. So that's my bad experiences, but mostly it's good.

I: Ok, is there anything about, like, the positive parts that you would want to talk about?

P: Yeah, um, a lot of groups are being more inclusive now, and as a person that like, I'm definitely masc, but um, I do feel like there's a lot of pressure to um, be as masculine as you can, and I just like it when groups like, clarify that like, "hey you don't have to do that" and there are cis men that, cis straight men even, that uh, do drag and stuff and you don't have to like hate yourself for the things you like. Especially Trans Brothers*, but also, Trans Brothers* just like gives you a chance to like, post pictures of yourself, or um, just like, be your authentic self with

no judgement, which is really nice. Especially for people who probably aren't out of the closet yet, things of that nature.

I: Yeah, thanks for sharing that. So, how do you engage in these communities on social media? Do you actively post direct original content in these communities? Or do you mostly just scroll through passively?

P: It's a mix. Like, some days I really just want to interact with the community so I'll post like, concerns I might have, or like a meme I found, but most times I'm just like, scrolling and I'm like, I might like this status, or I might comment on it, or I might just like not even really say anything about it.

I: Yeah. So have you ever felt supported by others in these trans-specific communities on social media?

P: Yes. Like, um, do you want me to explain that?

I: If you want to.

P: Ok. Like, if you were to like, say um "this experience happened to me, and I feel really bad" or "what is some advice on like, coming out?" or "helping someone treat you better as a trans person" and then a lot of people will give you advice. Usually good advice. Which, just, knowing that people have been through the same thing as you kind of helps.

I: Yeah, definitely. And, has engaging in these trans-specific communities on social media helped or hurt your mental health in any way?

P: Um, ones that I currently use have helped, but the ones in the past that are a little more toxic I guess, they have hurt.

I: Understandable, yeah. Alright, is there anything else you want to like, talk about or anything like that? Those are pretty much all the questions that I had written down, but if there's anything else you want to say or talk about...

P: Um, I, well, I guess maybe like, there are very, in my opinion there are very few, um, trans-related pages or groups that, like, target certain interests I guess? There was the um, trans men who run*, for people that like to run and stuff, and then there's like a couple of art pages, that are for trans or queer people that like to do art, but there's not like, for people who like to read or, people who really like cars, or, I don't know. It's all kind of bunched together and you get a lot of people that have many different interests trying to like, interact with each other. Trying.

laughter

I: Yeah, *laughter* trying is the key word there. Alright, well, um, do you have any other questions for me about anything?

P: Uh, no, not really.

I: Alright, well that's all I really have, so, thanks so much for talking to me, and for your great answers and everything. And, you know, um, if you're at all interested, once I'm done kind of writing everything up, like, I can, you know, send you a copy and everything like that if you want, if that's something you're interested in at all, but I mean other than that, thanks so much for talking to me and you know, I hope you have a great rest of your day.

P: Yeah, thanks. You should send me a copy of it.

I: Ok, cool, yeah.

P: Alright, well thanks for taking the time, good luck.

I: Yeah, thanks, have a good one.

Interview 3: Jared

Interviewer (I): So, first question is kind of like, some basic kind of like, introductory like, background stuff. Do you want to just like, state your age, race, gender identity, and your pronouns?

Participant (P): Sure, age: 22, race: black/African-American, gender identity: non-binary trans, and pronouns he/him/his, they/them/theirs.

I: Amazing, cool. So how long have you been using social media?

P: *laughs* a really long time. I will say, I think it was either Facebook or Tumblr that was first, I think it was Tumblr that was first, and that was like when I was like, 13 or 14.

I: Ok, cool. Which social media platforms do you use?

P: I use Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr. I don't usually use Facebook, and I don't usually use YouTube, if that's like- but yeah that's like, those are the three, yup.

I: Ok, and how much time would you say you spend on them per day?

P: Too much *laughter* Do you mind if I check? Because I know there's like the thing-

I: Oh yeah, that's true.

P: Um, I've been trying to do a lot less because when I saw it at first, how much I used, I was like, excuse me? Um, oh, that's for today, so that's why it's so low. Um, oh, that's- last seven days, social networking, ok, we're gonna say an hour? Is that what it is? I don't know how to look at it, but, I guess like over an hour. Yeah. This is the total, oh sorry, it says per day right there, it says like 8 hours for like, all-day on the screen, but then it says like- I'm gonna say an hour at least. We're gonna push it to 2 hours though, 'cause, yeah *laughter*

I: Yeah, no problem. Are you out about your gender identity on your social media accounts?

P: Oh, yes. That was the first place. Yeah.

I: Um, are you a part of any trans-specific groups or communities on social media?

P: No, yeah, yeah I am. Uh, I think Facebook, um, I'm part of a non-binary just like, group. And then, um, oh, do you wanna pau- oh no, she's good? Ok, um, then, on Tumblr, it's not- it's not like an official group, but it's more like on Twitter all of my- but on twitter I follow a lot of other trans people, and like, so I'm in that community. It's more of like, just communities. But on Facebook is the only like, group.

I: Yeah. Um, and, how much time would you say you spend, you know, kind of interacting in these community spaces per week?

P: Um, every time I'm on social media.

I: Ok.

P: There's like, never a time that I'm interacting in a different type of community space.

I: And, what have your experiences been like interacting in these communities on social media?

P: Um, extremely validating. So, before I said that the first place that I stated my gender identity was on social media, and that's because, like, that was the first place that I learned like, more so what it is the first time, and kind of met other people who also identified similarly, other than like, college. And, um, so what was the question again? I'm sorry.

I: No, it's ok, what have your experiences been like-

P: Oh! So is this more so like, talking about experiences that you have, learning new information, learning that you're not the only one going through that, just being validated all the time. So, yeah, just more so like, very uplifting, very validating, meeting people that you get to meet in person, sometimes if they're around, so, yeah,

I: So you would say like, for the most part your interactions have been like, positive?

P: Very, very, very, very, very positive, yes.

I: Have you had any negative experiences that you can think of?

P: Within the community? Yes, actually, and it wasn't like, anything personal, it's more so like, you know, within every community there are people who just have different perspectives, um, and different attitudes towards different things. So, you know, like, within the trans community, well it's- it's two aspects. So, um, I'm black and I'm trans, so, like, it's, within the realm of sometimes seeing racism through- in the trans community and then on the other side of it, just, folks who don't think being non-binary is an actual thing, or folks who think that um, if you're trans, you have to act this way or if you're trans you have to have dysphoria or something like that. Um, so, it's like, things like that, which have never been things that are like, personal, but more so just seeing things that are just kind of like, disheartening or disappointing.

I: Ok, cool. And, how do you- how do you engage in these communities on social media? Do you actively post things? Like, actively post direct, original content? Or do you mostly just scroll through passively?

P: Twitter? Original content often, a little bit more now, less before. Tumblr, usually just scrolling and reblogging. Yeah.

I: Alright, cool.

P: Oh, and on Instagram, it's like, less posting and more just like, commenting on people's things, or like, that's where I probably have DMed people more often, because like, just like, commenting on their stories and stuff like that.

I: Mhm. And uh, have you ever felt supported by others in these trans-specific communities?

P: Oh, yes. Yeah. So, before I came to college, that's probably where I got most of the support. I wasn't even, I didn't identify as trans yet, but I like, obviously you are, so like, I like, just like, talked to a lot of folks, and in college, even though I received a lot of support obviously like, from friends and everything, like, moments when I can or just like, moments where theres like other information to get, or anything like that. Um, yeah, just like, all the time. Just like, just seeing the fact that somebody has experienced something similar to what you're experiencing. Just obviously like really supportive and uplifting, and then if you post something, and people are like affirming you, and saying like "yeah!" "I'm proud of you," like, that's also really great too.

I: Yeah, awesome. And my last question, has engaging in these trans-specific communities helped or hurt your mental health in any way?

P: Helped, without a doubt. Hurting my mental health? I would say no, it's like, it affects my mental health, and it can be- it's not even, so, interpret this as you wish, but it's more so just the aspect of social media in general where you're like, seeing a bunch of people doing things, um, and you're like, "dang, I want to do that," or like, you're transitioning, and everyone's transition is different and youre like "dang, I want to be there" and blah blah blah, and then, um, also the discussions. But it's not really like, people personally affecting me, or it's not even like, the aspect of the community itself, as more as just like, you know, access to people doing different things and being on different levels, kind of like, makes you think about yourself more often. But, um, it's never been to a point where it's like, severely negatively impacted- definitely overwhelmingly positive. Yeah.

I: And, uh, anything else you want to say before we, kind of wrap up? Or-

P: Anything else I want to say? Um, no, I don't think so. You're great.

I: Cool *laughter* alright, thank you so much.

P: Of course.

Interview 4: Jayden

Interviewer (I): Alrighty, so, my first question is you know, just some like, basic, demographic kind of stuff, but do you mind just stating your age, race, gender identity, and your pronouns?

Participant (P): Age: 21, Race: Black, you said gender identity? Male, and pronouns: he/him/his.

I: Alright, cool. So, next, how long have you been using social media?

P: How long have I been using what?

I: How long have you been using social media?

P: Oh, shit, oh, gosh. Um, I feel like elementary school?

I: Ok.

P: So, like, 10?

I: 10 years?

P: Oh, 10 years?

I: Oh, since you were 10?

P: Yeah, so maybe like 11 years?

I: Ok, cool.

P: I don't know when MySpace came out, when was that?

I: *laughter* a long-ass time ago.

P: I know, too fucking long ago. But I know I had one, so...yeah. So, sorry, go ahead.

I: No, its ok. Which social media platforms do you currently use?

P: Um, so I frequent the most on Instagram and Twitter. But I have a Facebook, a Snapchat, a Tumblr, I have it all.

I: Mmhm, alright. And how much time would you say you spend on social media per day?

P: Yikes. Maybe like, 10 hours? Like, between 8 to 10 hours.

I: Ok. And are you out about your gender identity on your social media accounts?

P: Um...yes? Not as much on my Instagram.

I: Ok.

P: But everywhere else, yes. And it's not that I'm not out, it's just, it doesn't necessarily say anything in my bio. But like, I'm not closeted. So, if anyone were to you know, ask or talk about it, then I would you know, talk about it.

I: Ok. And are you a part of any trans-specific groups or communities on any social media platforms?

P: Yes.

I: Alright.

P: Some on Facebook, some on Instagram, and I don't think Twitter, mostly Facebook, and a little bit on Instagram.

I: Ok. And how much time would you say you spend interacting in these communities per week?

P: Not very often.

I: Ok. And what have your experiences been like interacting in these kinds of communities on social media?

P: It kind of just depends. I feel like, the wider groups with more I guess diversity you could say, a little bit more inclusion, I don't frequent those groups as often. 'Cause, a lot of the times, they're really white and, you know, I see enough white people in my day to day, I don't need to go seek them out on social media. For my other ones though, I would say that I currently use

those for like, educational purposes or like, specific like, social events. So if it doesn't really have to do with either of those things, then I'm not super active.

I: Ok. Have you had any like, more positive or negative experiences in these kinds of groups?

P: Um, so, I mean, with groups that have a lot of people, there's always going to be, you know, some people who slip through the cracks. So yeah, like, you know, there's always that one trans person that's like, internalized a bunch of shit, and decides to take it out on other people. I know there's like a lot of nonbinary bashing happening within trans groups a lot. Nothing like, specific towards me. I guess mostly positive things. Or nothing at all, I know there are some times I've asked questions in groups and they've been published but no one's interacted with them. So, I don't know if you would count that as a negative response *laughter*

I: No, I feel you. So how do you engage in these communities on social media? Do you actively post direct, original content? Or do you mostly just scroll through passively?

P: I mostly scroll through passively. If I'm on Twitter, and, you know, I'm like, talking to my squad, of like, the trans men that I follow on Twitter, then I'm a little bit more interactive. But if it comes to like Facebook and Instagram, it's mostly just like, scrolling and liking, maybe a comment here or there, but, just scrolling and liking.

I: Alright. Have you ever felt supported by others in these trans-specific communities on social media?

P: Yes? Yeah. There's always a couple people who like, really make the group worth staying in. Um, so, yes. But, it's really weird that the more I talk about this I realize that like, my community's such a small community anyways that like, all the black trans people in New York

City are kind of their own group, it's not just its own official thing, but I do know that we're all pretty supportive of one another, or at least try to be. So I don't think I've ever not felt supported.

I: Alright. And my last question is: has engaging in these trans-specific communities on social media helped or hurt your mental health in any way?

P: Uh, definitely helped. 'Cause like, even through the bullshit, you know that people exist that you could talk to, and you're not alone, and like, just knowing that there's, you know, a group of people that you could actually go and like, reach out to and potentially talk to that's like, yeah that's like, worth a lot. I mean, when you're a little kid in the middle of nowhere and you think that you're the only queer kid that exists, I mean that's definitely a little damaging. But then you're in your little Facebook group, whatever, and whether you interact or not, just like, the presence is helpful.

I: Alright, well, is there anything else you wanted to add or say or anything?

P: No, I think I'm good. You asked really good questions, Matt.

I: *laughter* Alright, well thanks so much for talking to me and you know, for your great answers and everything.

Interview 5: Marcus

Interviewer (I): Alright, so, do you want to just- as kind of like a basic, introductory kind of question, do you want to just state your age, race, gender identity, and pronouns?

Participant (P): Ok, so, not my name. Ok, ok. So, is it on?

I: Yes *laughter*

P: Ok, I am 22, I use he/him/his pronouns, was that a question? He/him/his pronouns?

I: Yeah

P: And I identify as transmasculine, sometimes trans man? Definitely trans masc.

I: Ok. And how long have you been using social media?

P: Since, like, I guess I would say sixth grade? Like, Facebook was definitely the big, new thing, so I was like, moving onto that without my parents permission, you know.

I: *laughter* Yeah. And which social media platforms do you currently use?

P: I use a lot of them, but my most common ones are definitely Twitter and Instagram.

I: Ok. And how much time would you say you spend on them per day?

P: It's actually really bad, my Instagram has been calling me out 'cause I put on reminders, so I like try to limit Instagram to only about 45 minutes per day, sometimes I go over depending on how slow the day is or how much I'm trying to avoid work. Twitter? Oh god, probably at least an hour. At least an hour, yeah.

I: Ok. And are you, um, are you out about your gender identity on your social media accounts?

P: Yes.

I: Ok. And are you a part of any trans-specific groups or communities on any social media platforms?

P: Um, not on any of the platforms, I follow a lot of trans people in general, um, I'm part of a queer housing and queer employment group on Facebook, and those have been like, helpful and engaging to look at.

I: Ok, cool. And so, um, my next question is, what have your experiences been like interacting on social media, you know, in these kinds of like, spaces?

P: I think that it's been like, a very varied experience. Because I feel like a lot of people use it, and they're like, they're queer in the sense that they use it as a political term, you know, people of color, trans people to the front, and like, nonbinary people especially, and like they use it in that respect, but I've also met people who like, just like, identify as like, I don't want to say just identify as gay, they don't necessarily adopt the politics of it, so it's very like weird. So you'll see people who are like, very progressive and liberal and very much forward-thinking, and then you'll meet people who are very conservative, and it's definitely kind of jarring. I feel like it's been especially jarring like, talking to like, trans men, because you just never know where the line is gonna go. I feel like some of the trans people that I talk to like, they are like, very very forward thinking like, identify as Marxist, you know identify in those kinds of ways where you know, you notice that they've done a lot of their homework in terms of social justice, and like what they think the world should be, but with trans men it's like a wild card. Like, you might be talking to someone who voted for Trump, so like, it's very confusing, kind of scary, but you know.

I: Mmm, yeah. And, yeah, so would you say like, any positive or negative experiences that you could think of?

P: I mean, there have been negative experiences where I've just seen like, people write negative things about like, so if someone would post a picture like, post-surgery, where like people would

say like, very degrading things like, “oh, your surgeon did a bad job,” or “it doesn’t look good,” or “you don’t look trans enough,” basically. And those things can be really really like, jarring to see and really negative because if you’re like, now I’m scared that someone is gonna think that when I get this done in the way that they wouldn’t like it to be done that it looks bad, or something like that. So, it makes me more anxious to like, interact with my own community in a way.

I: Mmhm, alright, that makes sense, yeah. And, how do you engage in these kinds of spaces on social media? Do you actively post direct, original content? Or do you mostly just scroll through passively?

P: Um, Instagram I’m definitely a passive person, I’m not someone who like, posts a lot of pictures. But for Twitter I like feel more free to like, make comments to reply to stuff, and just like talk to people in general. It’s just, more low-stakes I think.

I: Ok, cool. And, have you ever felt supported by others in these kinds of spaces on social media?

P: Yeah, I would say so, ‘cause I feel like the people who I feel supported by like, giving advice if you’re like, going through- thinking of a job, or like, going through a rough time, so I find that seeing other people’s experiences and seeing their opinions and viewpoints of how to deal with it, manage it, it’s been really helpful ‘cause I’m like “oh, I never thought about this before,” or like, “I haven’t come- I haven’t adopted this as part of my philosophy before,” “oh wow, this makes sense.” It’s like, having an older brother at times, an older sibling.

I: Yeah. And, my last question, has engaging in these kinds of trans-specific or queer-specific spaces on social media helped or hurt your mental health in any way?

P: Um, I think that overall, it's a net positive? And I say that just because I feel like people who I follow specifically do not ascribe to like, western beauty standards and certain ideologies. I feel like almost everyone I follow, I like, try to make sure they fit into like, what I want to see, so like, following a lot of people being like, who are overweight or are considered fat by society, people who have different levels of ability, like, people with different skill sets, so I feel like it's been more beneficial overall.

I: Ok, cool. Is there anything else you want to say or add or anything?

P: Um, I think it also helps just normalize like, beauty. 'Cause I feel like a lot of times society always talks about trans folx they like, don't put them in a light that makes them beautiful, and I feel like by seeing people's you know, seeing people's selfies all the time, you know, like, even when they're posting a thirst trap picture, like, you're seeing how unique your community is and you like internalize that beauty and see that beauty in yourself as well, which has been like, really helpful.

I: Alright, well, thanks for your great answers and everything like that.