FOR LACK OF A BETTER WORD: NEO-IDENTITIES IN NON-CISGENDER, NON-STRAIGHT COMMUNITIES ON TUMBLR

by

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Abstract

Non-cisgender and non-straight identity language has long been a site of contention and evolution. There has been an increase in new non-cisgender, non-straight identity words since the creation of the internet, thanks to social media platforms like Tumblr. Tumblr in particular has been host to many conversations about identity and self-naming, though these conversations have not yet been the subject of much academic research. Through interviews and analysis of Tumblr posts, this thesis examines the emergence of new identity words, or neo-identities, used by non-cisgender and non-straight users of Tumblr. The work presents neo-identities as strategies for resisting and challenging cisheteronormative conceptions of gender and attraction, as well as sources of comfort and relief for non-cisgender/non-straight people who feel 'broken' and excluded from mainstream identity categories. This thesis also posits that Tumblr is uniquely suited for conversations about identity because of its potential for self-expression, community, and anonymity.

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Introduction

"You will want to cry. Because after searching and searching you have found a word to validate how you feel, to tell you that you are not alone, you are not broken, there is a word for people like you and it is okay."

Nita Tyndall, "How It Feels to Discover You're Demisexual"

In a letter to her younger self, Nita Tyndall writes about the tumultuous experience of growing up demisexual. Demisexuality is an asexual[1] spectrum identity, and describes the inability to experience sexual attraction until a strong emotional bond is formed with someone. For Tyndall, much of her youth is characterized by confusion and misunderstanding, because she's unable to match a word to her experience: "You don't understand a lot. You don't understand the crushes so many of your friends describe when they talk about boys, don't understand the instant attraction they feel." Discovering the word demisexual is a moment of revelation and relief. She promises her younger self: "one day you will understand yourself, one day you will start to feel proud of yourself, and that is worth everything."

'Demisexual' is one example of the myriad of 'neo-identities' emerging in non-cisgender[2] and non-straight communities[3] online. In the context of this paper, 'neo-identities' are new or uncommon words used to describe sexual orientation, romantic orientation, and gender identity. These identity labels communicate experiences of gender and attraction that aren't represented in mainstream language. While words like 'gay,' 'lesbian,' 'bisexual,' and 'transgender' are recognizable to most people, neo-identities are still relatively unknown. Some

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[1] Asexual (or ace) people do not experience sexual attraction. Often, I will shorten the word 'asexual' to 'ace,' and I will similarly shorten the word 'aromantic' to 'aro.' 'Aromantic' refers to people who don't experience romantic attraction.

[2] 'Cisgender' people identify with the gender they are assigned at birth. Throughout the paper, this will be occasionally shortened to 'cis.'

[3] 'Non-cisgender' and 'non-straight' are used in this thesis as an alternative to LGBTQ+, queer, or other umbrella terms because those terms are often divisive. I explain my decision to use this terminology (and the problems associated with it) later in this section.

of them are highly specific and personal, only used by a handful of people; others, like demisexual, are slowly working their way into the mainstream. These neo-identities are mainly present on Tumblr, where they're being coined and negotiated by non-straight and non-cis people who feel inadequately represented by popular identity categories. Tumblr's potential for self-expression, community, and anonymity makes it a fitting platform for non-cis and non-straight people grappling with issues of identity and naming, which is why these conversations are happening primarily on Tumblr rather than other social networks like Twitter and Facebook. On Tumblr, non-cis and non-straight people create, discuss, and catalogue neo-identities not only to challenge dominant gender and sexuality norms, but in order to create space for themselves in identity language. Without appropriate identity words, many non-cis and non-straight people feel broken or invisible. Neo-identities provide much-needed relief and comfort to marginalized people feeling alienated by mainstream identity categories.

Overview

Through analysis of Tumblr posts, other online writing, and interviews with neo-identity users, this research explores the ways that non-cis and non-straight people are defining themselves with new words, why they feel the need to do so, and why it's happening primarily on Tumblr. The paper is written in plain, casual language for stylistic accessibility, and my reasons for this are explained further in Chapter 4. In Chapter 1, I provide an overview of neo-identities within the context of Tumblr, as well as their presence in English-language non-cis, non-straight communities in the past 75 years. I establish neo-identities as more than just a passing fad, but as part of a long, important history of self-naming among non-cis and non-straight people. Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature in the areas of queer theory, gender studies, and cyber studies, in order to lay the theoretical groundwork for the remainder of the paper. In

Chapter 3, I introduce Tumblr, describing what it is, how it works, and who uses it. Because Tumblr operates differently than most other social networking sites, I provide a condensed background on how communities form and interact on Tumblr. I also outline some of the reactions to and criticisms of the neo-identities on Tumblr, by people within and outside of the non-cis, non-straight community.

In Chapter 4, I introduce my methodology by disclosing my own identity, point of view, and motives as a researcher and queer person. I provide an overview of my methodology, and introduce my nine interview participants. Chapter 5 is the results section of the paper where, using what I learned in my interviews, I describe the ways that people on Tumblr are using neo-identities. I argue that neo-identities challenge dominant ideas about desire and gender and, in doing so, make space for people that have been traditionally excluded by linguistic categories. I show that these identities call into question categories we take for granted, suggesting there are more experiences beyond 'male/female' and 'straight/bisexual/gay.' I investigate why Tumblr is such a useful platform for conversations about neo-identities and conclude by discussing some of the limitations of identity labels. In my conclusion, I summarize my findings and suggest directions for future research.

Shift Happens

I've made a very deliberate choice to use 'non-cisgender and/or non-straight' most of the time when I'm referring to the people in my research. I changed my own terminology several times as I wrote this thesis, as I've struggled to navigate what terminology is most respectful and accurate. Initially, I used 'queer,' which is a term that's been embraced by academia in disciplines like 'queer theory,' and has also been embraced by many non-cis and non-straight people as a way of describing themselves. Some non-cis and non-straight people have come to

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think of 'queer' as a word that can more easily accommodate a wide variety of non-normative identities, without ever having to pin itself down to a single definition. This is part of its appeal (Peters 106). I was also drawn to using 'queer' because it's a word that I personally identify with. As I developed in my research, I became more aware of the tension around the word 'queer.' Its history as a slur colours many people's understanding of it, and there's been a push in many non-cis/non-straight communities to shift away from the word 'queer' as an umbrella term. I've made an effort not to use it in a way that disregards people's preference and tense relationship to the word. When I do use the word 'queer,' it's usually in reference to someone's personal preference for it, to queer theory as a discipline, or in order to stay true to the language used in someone else's research.

The other words I debated using are acronyms: LGBTQ+ and MOGAI. LGBTQ+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (plus others). Sometimes this acronym is extended to LGBTQQIP2SA (or a similar variant), which stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Pansexual, Two-Spirit, and Asexual/Aromantic. The 'plus' in the first acronym is meant to make it as inclusive as possible, for identities that aren't commonly recognized, but still some people are uncomfortable being classified under this label. Others consider it too clunky or not inclusive enough. MOGAI is a lesser known term, coined on Tumblr by user cisphobeofficial, which stands for Marginalized Orientations, Gender Alignments, and Intersex. Before I began my interviews, MOGAI was the acronym I planned to use in my work, because it seemed to me (from my admittedly limited perspective) like the most recent, inclusive, and agreed-upon umbrella term. In reality, it was more likely the most popular umbrella term at the time. It wasn't until I put out my call for participants that I realized many people are still uncomfortable with MOGAI. Many people worry that the term will be co-opted

by cishet[4] people who feel they fall under 'marginalized orientations' because of their interest in kink or polyamory.

The terms "MOGAI", "LGBTQ+", and "queer" all represent a certain idea of the community that is not necessarily welcoming to all people. All three options also have their benefits; for many people, they represent belonging and community. In order to make my language more welcoming, I switched to "non-cisgender and/or non-straight." My call for participants on Tumblr received many more responses when I changed my language; making my language more neutral helped more people feel comfortable participating in the research.

There are still problems with 'non-cis' and 'non-straight.' It can be problematic to define ourselves in terms of what we're not, but I've accepted that there's no single answer to problems of sociohistorical semantics. My solution is an imperfect one, because all words are caught up in their histories and associations.

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[4] A shorter way of saying 'cisgender and heterosexual.'

Chapter 1: Introduction to Neo-identities

"Because as pervasive as the idea is that labels are for soup cans, not people, there's something so relieving in finding a word that wholly encompasses, or at least starts to encompass, the experiences you've been having. Finding the right label or word for your sexuality can be validating—at last, here is a word to sum up and explain what I've been feeling, a word that fits!"

Nita Tyndall, "Labels are for Soup Cans (and also for me)"

Nita Tyndall's essay describes the way identity language can help people find themselves. Personal essays like this provide one example of how neo-identities are slowly being acknowledged by the mainstream media. People are slowly but surely recognizing that 'straight,' 'gay,' and 'bisexual' are not the only categories for describing types of attraction, and 'male' and 'female' aren't the only categories of gender. Even celebrities are beginning to chime in and complicate societal understandings of sexuality and gender. In August 2015, popular musician Miley Cyrus came out as pansexual in an article for Elle UK, and DJ personality and actress Ruby Rose openly identifies herself as genderfluid (Sieczkowski; Molloy). People are feeling the need to describe themselves in new ways, even in contemporary popular media. While some people consider non-normative identities a trend, many sources speak to the emotional importance of identity language. In another article on demisexuality, Bitty Navarro writes for BuzzFeed about her experience coming to terms with her identity: "I'm less stressed about labels, in general. What used to torture me I now use to navigate life with less discomfort."

Terms like demisexual, pansexual, and genderfluid are slowly gaining mainstream recognition, but these pop culture examples only provide a small glimpse of the larger movement taking place online. In non-cis, non-straight communities on the internet, people are coining and popularizing completely new words to describe sexual orientation, romantic orientation, and gender identity. Right now, these conversations are most common and most visible on Tumblr.

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People in Tumblr's non-cis, non-straight community are currently engaged in ongoing conversations about new identity labels. Several blogs have popped up primarily for the purpose
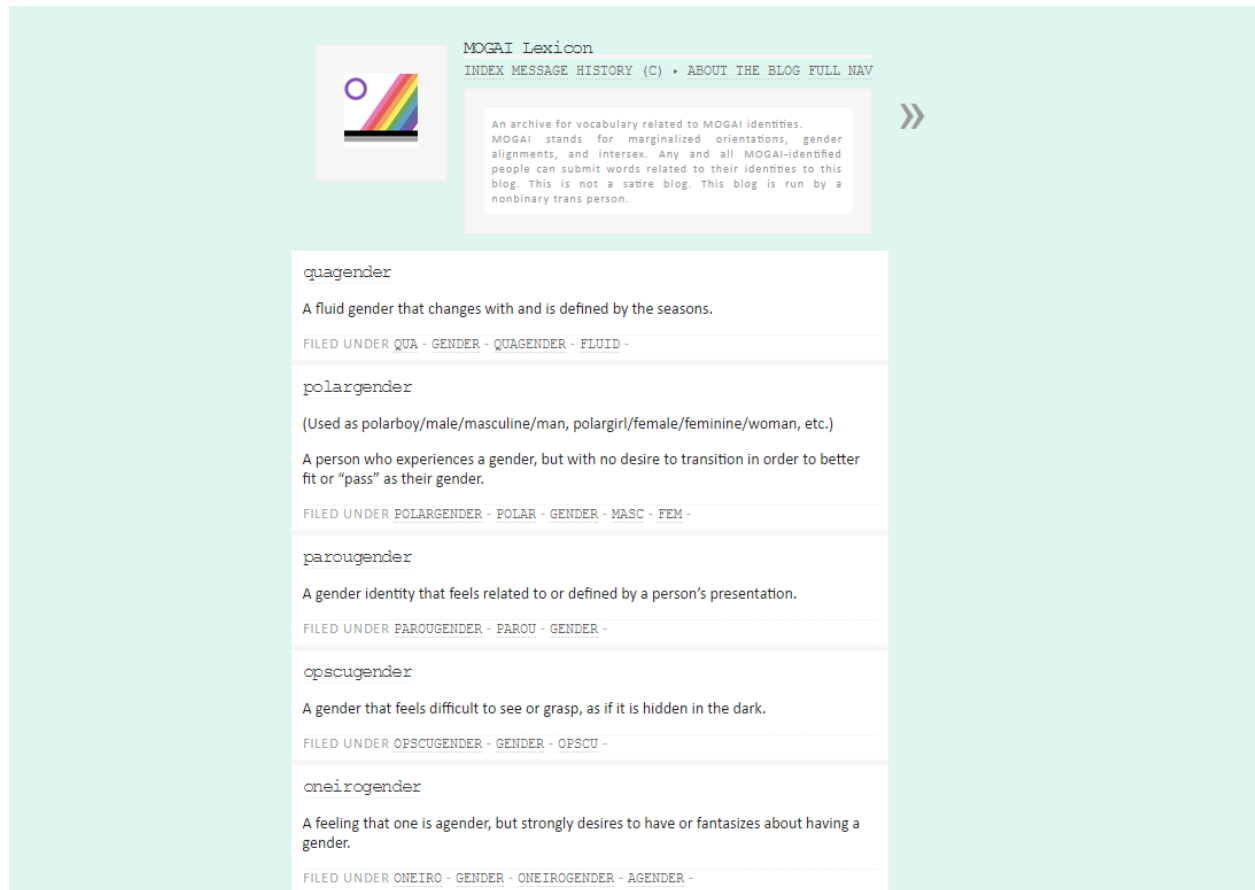
Figure 1 A screenshot of the blog mogai-lexicon.

of cataloguing the emergence of these identity words.

The community of people on Tumblr talking about neo-identities have, in many ways, created a welcoming environment that promotes self-expression and identity discovery. There are multiple blogs like mogai-lexicon.tumblr.com which have been created to catalogue new identity words, and blogs like pride-flags-for-us.tumblr.com that focus on creating pride flags for a wide variety of gender identities and sexual/romantic orientations. Many people within the community also make a point of creating and circulating 'positivity posts' like the one below, which offer support and validation to people who are non-cis and non-straight. Tumblr is by no

means an all-welcoming environment with no problems; but the communities creating

conversations about neo-identities do put effort into creating safe, welcoming spaces that

promote self-expression, identity exploration, and self-care. Many people who use neo-identities

have struggled with not knowing how to define their gender or orientation, so offering guidance

to others is important to many neo-identity users on Tumblr.

Nonbinary people:

You are real.

You exist.

You matter.

You are not alone.

Please never forget any of this.

nonbinary non binary genderqueer   thursday
genderfluid gender fluid gender neutral   2/6
gender queer genderflux agender
bigender trigender third gender
intergender androgyne demiguy demigirl
neutrois positive things
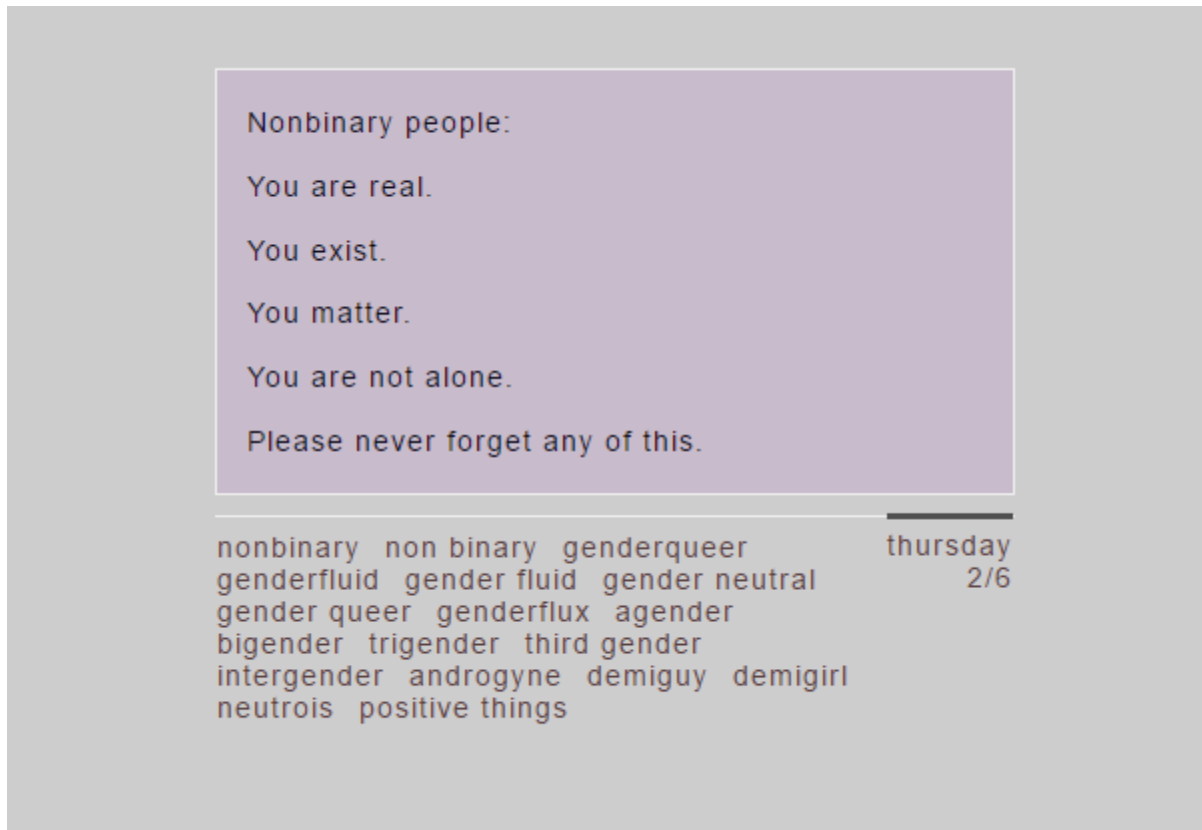
Figure 2 Positivity post from thenonbinarysafespace.tumblr.com.

The neo-identities that are emerging on Tumblr are often highly specific and personal, and

sometimes they're only used by a handful of people. Linguists would characterize many neo-

identities as nonce words: experimental words created to solve specific, one-off communication

problems (e.g., personal neo-pronouns only used by one person). Many others would be

considered coinages: relatively new words which resonate within isolated social groups but

which are not well-known beyond those circles (e.g., identities like monstergender and

xenogender, explained later in the work). True neologisms (e.g., aromantic, demigirl, explained later in the work) and fully lexicalized words (e.g., butch, femme) are rarer, as most neo-identities have yet to pop up anywhere other than Tumblr. Neo-identities represent the ways that non-cis and non-straight people are grappling with cultural ideas about attraction and gender. They challenge cisheteronormative conceptions of identity. Many people are suspicious of neo-identities. I argue that this is because they're practiced by a population of marginalized people whose voices are regularly silenced, and also because neo-identities require us to examine deeply ingrained ideas about gender and attraction. They push us to question categories like straight/gay/bisexual and male/female, and to challenge dominant cultural perspectives on sexuality, romantic identity, and gender.

The History of Neo-identities

Because of the hetero- and cisnormativity of mainstream language, self-naming has always been an important practice in the non-cis, non-straight community. The word 'neo-identities' doesn't refer to a new phenomenon or new experiences, but new words to describe those experiences. The experience that someone is describing when they label their gender 'opscugender' (see Figure 1) is not necessarily a new experience; the word 'opscugender' simply represents a new attempt to name that experience. People who fall under the definitions of neo-identities have always existed, but haven't always had the language for their experience. Likewise, 'niche' identities in non-cis, non-straight communities have always existed. There is a long history of creating, reclaiming, and redefining words in order to capture the experience of non-cis, non-straight identity.

Some identity words that are more well-known now could easily be conceived as the 'neo-identities' of an earlier time period. Words like 'butch' and 'femme,' which persist as

identifiers used in the non-cis, non-straight community today, played an important role in lesbian

history. In the 1940s and 1950s, the labels butch and femme referred to personal style and roles

that "organized lesbian intimacy," indicating the sexual preferences of each person in a butch-

femme dynamic, where the butch was assumed to be active and the femme passive (Kennedy &

Davis 191). These labels could be made even more specific, as with the label "stone butch,"[5]

which referred to a butch-identified woman who was "untouchable," only performing sexual acts

and never receiving them (Kennedy & Davis 192). These identity labels were more than just a

reproduction of heterosexual relationship dynamics; labels like butch and femme

"unquestionably transformed [heterosexual relationship roles] into specifically lesbian

interactions" (Kennedy & Davis 193). Words like butch and femme are an integral part of the

history of woman-loving women; and, though the meanings of these words have changed in

many ways, they continue to be important identity labels for articulating specific, personal

experiences of both gender and desire.

Butch and femme aren't the only examples of early 'neo-identities.' "Boi" emerged in the

early 1990s within hip hop music; it was then adopted first by 'skaters' and 'emo' men/boys,

then the BDSM segment of the gay male community, before finally becoming a word used by a

wide range of queer-identified people (Wannamaker 18-20). In general, "boi" refers to non-cis

and/or non-straight people who identify at least part of their identity as masculine ("Boi").

Similarly, "stud" is used in non-cis, non-straight communities to describe a female or non-binary

person that identifies as masculine in some way ("Trans, Genderqueer and Queer Terms

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[5] The term 'stone butch' even inspired the creation of a more contemporary neo-identity, lithsexual/lithromantic, which refers to people who experience sexual or romantic attraction, but either don't want or don't need that attraction to be reciprocated. In some cases, their attraction disappears or fades when it is reciprocated. The people who coined these words (tumblr user lithromantic) used the prefix lith-, meaning stone, as a reference to stone butch identity.

Glossary"). Some neologisms gain wider currency and lexicalize to the extent that they no longer seem like they could be classified as neo-identities — butch and femme are one example, but also words like 'queer' and 'androgynous'.

While self-naming and language creation aren't new for non-cis and non-straight people, and the experiences being described by neo-identities aren't necessarily new, either, these identities are also influenced by the historical and cultural context within which they emerge. 'Butch lesbian' identity now is different from 'butch lesbian' identity in the 1950s simply because the cultural context surrounding that identity has changed and evolved. Similarly, the neo-identity lithromantic takes its name from stone butch identity and shares a similar definition, but both identities are still different in that they emerged in different contexts. Stuart Hall describes this contextual understanding of identity this way:

> Cultural identity…is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (225).

These experiences and identities are not entirely new but also not the same as they might have been in the past. Neo-identities, and the experiences of neo-identity users, are influenced by the context in which they emerge. Neo-identities are emerging now partly as a reaction to dominant cultural ideas about what it means to be gendered and what it means to experience desire. The experience and feeling of being demisexual isn't new; the desire to label oneself as such is. Mainstream society's understanding of sexual attraction influences that desire. While it's important to understand that neo-identities aren't new and don't necessarily represent new

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feelings, it's also important to remember that the experience associated with these identities is heavily influenced by cultural context.

Why Neo-identities Matter

To many people, 'neo-identities on Tumblr' seems like a very niche topic. Many of the lesser-known identity words haven't made it into the mainstream yet, and it's possible they never will. Some new identity words will only ever be seen or used by a handful of people. However, the rise in neo-identity creation on Tumblr represents a cultural shift in how non-cis and non-straight people understand and define themselves. The influx of new identity words suggests that, while non-cis and non-straight people have always resisted cisheteronormativity, they are now doing so in a different way: through the creation of hundreds of new, incredibly specific identity words that describe very particular experiences of gender and desire.

The neo-identities this paper focuses on are regularly criticized as being a new phenomenon created by young people looking for attention (often young people on Tumblr, specifically). Pejoratives like 'Tumblrina,' 'Tumblr special snowflake,' and 'genderspecial' are all words to describe a particular type of non-cis and/or non-straight Tumblr user that often uses uncommon identity labels to describe themselves. Keisha Mawer writes in the *Thought Catalog* piece "Tumblr's Strange Trend Of Creating Minority Identities": "Everyone wants to join the super special secret queer clubhouse and turn genuine issues into trendy fashion statements for bored suburban brats who want sympathy and attention despite never having faced any real discrimination in their lives." Mawer is echoing a common critique of neo-identities: they're new, illegitimate, and a product of attention-seeking 'suburban brats.' But these criticisms ignore the fact that non-traditional identity labels have always existed. Throughout history, there have been many new words to describe non-cis, non-straight identity. Often, these identities take

considerable time to be accepted into the mainstream and to become recognizable outside of

niche communities, if they ever are. Neo-identities are not a new phenomenon, nor are they

likely to be a short-lived one, though how neo-identities look and how they're used changes over

time. In this thesis, I present the coinage of neo-identities as a method for critiquing dominant

narratives of desire and gender, as well as a life-saving resource for people who feel left out of

mainstream linguistic categories.

Chapter 2: Transforming Identity Language Online

"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

Audre Lorde

Tumblr has become the site of a wide variety of identity exploration and expression. I want to understand why and how non-cisgender and non-straight people are disrupting normative categories of identity, as well as how Tumblr (and the internet in general) plays a part in discovering and communicating these identity labels. My research sits at the intersection of queer theory, gender studies, linguistics, and cyber studies, and focuses in particular on the ways that language sometimes fails people who aren't straight or cisgender, as well as the ways that marginalized people use language to be subversive, and the role of the internet in facilitating that subversion. In this section, I draw from the work of a wide variety of scholars who address these topics and lay a theoretical foundation for the arguments I make later in my work.

Building off of the theorists discussed here, I look to answer some questions about language, identity, and the internet. What relationship do people have to their identity words, both online and offline? Why do people in the community build on existing terminology for sexual orientation, romantic orientation, and gender identity, making identity labels more and more specific? What role does Tumblr play in facilitating these kinds of discussions about identity?

Inequalities through Language

Languages are sites of struggle for many marginalized groups and is often used as a tool for control. In "Colonialism and Re-imagining Minority Language Management," Monica Heller writes that "language is bound up in post-colonial settings, as a direct result of the colonial modes of linguistic management imposed on colonised populations in the service of imperial regimes" (Heller 103). Historically, languages have often been used to represent the worldviews

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of a privileged minority. Language varieties outside the mainstream are usually in danger or being taken away or absorbed by that privileged minority, often "in the service of imperial regimes," in order to deprive other populations of a distinct voice and promote an artificial linguistic unity. In policies that enforce English language learning, "linguistic variability and geographic mobility get constructed … as 'problems' to be controlled" (Heller 104). Under imperialist regimes, groups are robbed of the freedom to speak their own language. Marie Battiste calls this cognitive imperialism, which "denies many groups of people their language and cultural integrity and maintains legitimacy of only one language, one culture, and one frame of reference" (Battiste 20). Some types of language are held up as more correct, more respectable, and more coherent than others. bell hooks calls English "the language of conquest and domination" and "the mask which hides the loss of so many tongues" (hooks 171). In this way, the English language is influenced by racism and colonialism and represents a loss of culture for many groups of people. Language can also be used to uphold other inequalities, and many academics have written about how language is used to promote sexism, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity, in addition to classism and white supremacy.

In the past, many scholars have addressed how language can be used to marginalize women. Luce Irigaray is one of the foundational writers on the sexism of language. In *This Sex Which Is Not One,* she criticizes Freud's conceptualization of the little girl as "nothing but a little boy" (Irigaray 69). She claims that Freud's theories can only exist within a system that privileges male experience, asking, "What meaning could the Oedipus complex have in a symbolic system other than patriarchy?" (Irigaray 73). For Irigaray, the androcentrism of Freud's work is emblematic of a larger problem: all philosophical language is inherently masculine. The feminine is only ever conceptualized in *relation* to the masculine, while masculinity is allowed to

stand on its own. For Irigaray, it's not possible to accurately talk about femininity using existing language, "for to speak of or about woman may always boil down to, or be understood as, a recuperation of the feminine within a logic that maintains it in repression, censorship, nonrecognition" (Irigaray 78). In her writing, Irigaray is basically issuing a call to arms, and she writes that, "what remains to be done, then, is to work at 'destroying' the discursive mechanism" and "jamming the theoretical machinery itself" (Irigaray 78). Feminist theory needs to operate outside of masculine discourse and, as such, outside of masculine language (which is, to Irigaray, all philosophical language). The 'language problem' Irigaray describes is well-summarized by a line that bell hooks pulls from an Adrienne Rich poem: "This is the oppressor's language yet I need it to talk to you" (hooks 167).

In addition to representing a default male perspective, language can be used to reinforce hetero- and cisnormativity, as well. In an article on bisexuality and language, Tarik Bereket and Jennifer Brayton discuss "the lack of language choices that are available to bisexuals when trying to communicate their reality with others in the social world" (Bereket and Brayton 51). Because language is "dominated by an overarching structure that locates words through opposition," this inevitably means that "one part of the duality is favored and preferred over the other, such that one word reflects dominance and the other word indicates subordinate status" (Bereket and Brayton 51-52). Male/female and straight/gay are just some examples of the binary oppositions that Bereket and Brayton are referring to, where one half of the binary is thought of as less-than. Bisexual identity is insufficiently explained in terms of the straight/gay binary. A bisexual person isn't half-gay and half-straight. They aren't sometimes straight or sometimes gay; they're always bisexual. It's difficult to make this concept understandable to people who aren't bisexual, because our understanding of the world is so reliant on binary systems. Without adequate

language to describe their experience, "those who fall outside binary categories are marginalized and made invisible, unable to speak about their reality" (Bereket and Brayton 52). This is true especially for people who don't fit neatly into the categories of straight/gay and male/female, like many people who use neo-identities.

Janelle Harms makes similar claims about language. In her work, Harms looks at monolingual learner's dictionaries (MLDs) for English and finds that they represent "reproductive heterosexuality as the correct, normal and 'natural' mode of human expression" (Harms 2). In the MLDs, "sex, gender, and sexuality are represented in ways that make them difficult for the reader to 'queer'" (5), so that people who aren't cis or straight are categorized as abnormal. Because of this, non-straight and non-cis English language learners "are marginalised as imperfect citizens and are compelled to embody heterosexual culture in both language and behaviour in order to achieve increased legitimacy within the English-speaking nation-state" (Harms 1). Harms's work on MLDs is a perfect example of the intersection of the English language as a colonial tool and a mechanism for enforcing heteronormativity. People of marginalized identities can often feel trapped within a language that can't represent them. Exclusive, cisheteronormative language isolates people with 'non-normative' experiences of desire and gender, and this isolation is amplified for people of colour and for people who are learning English as a second language. Language is part of how we understand ourselves and how we make ourselves understood to other people; without adequate language, we're unable to do that.

Language as Subversive

Even though language can be used to uphold inequality, it can also be used in a subversive way. Many marginalized people work to 'make space' for themselves within existing

language structures. Speakers outside of the accepted societal norm "often must challenge the discourse in order to create a space to speak" (Allen and Faigley 143). This can mean creating, bending, and breaking language. One of the most notable examples of this is African American Vernacular English (AAVE). When writing about 'Black English,' James Baldwin said, "A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity" (6). Languages like AAVE evolve out of the exclusionary frameworks of mainstream language. bell hooks calls AAVE a "counter-language," that speaks "beyond the boundaries of conquest and domination" (170). Counter-languages are a strategy for fighting against oppression: "People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate" (Baldwin 5). Non-cis and non-straight people have also had to play with language, because the rigid, limited understandings of gender and desire make communicating their identities extremely difficult. In *Undoing Gender,* Judith Butler observes the difficulty of communicating the personal feeling of one's own gender: "when one speaks, one speaks a language that is already speaking, even if one speaks it in a way that is not precisely how it has been spoken before" (69). Existing, mainstream linguistic categories are often already tied into so many meanings that it's difficult to express concepts outside of hetero- and cisnormativity without creating new words or re-thinking old ones.

'Queer' languages are one example of ways that non-cis and non-straight people have historically disrupted mainstream language. Queer languages are often referred to as queerspeak or gayspeak. 'Gayspeak' refers mostly to Polari, a code language used by gay men in the UK during the 1940s and 1950s. It likely had roots in Italian, and moved from "theatrical circles" into gay culture during the nineteenth-century – though it's debatable whether these 'theatrical circles' were primarily gay or if gay performers adopted the slang (Cox and Fay 3-4). Polari was

obscure enough to effectively act as a code for gay men trying to communicate with each other without being 'found out' by heterosexuals, though it was also a way to express a shared identity and extended beyond discussions of sexuality and sex (Cox and Fay 2).

While Polari is a famous historical example of marginalized people manipulating language, its purpose was mostly to allow people to communicate without outing themselves. Other types of language manipulation and creation speak more to Butler's point about "language that is already speaking." Reclamation has played an important role in helping non-cis and non-straight people express their identities. Traditionally pathologized words like "bisexual" (originally used by writers like Freud to mean combining masculinity and femininity within one person) and "pansexual" (also used by Freud to refer to deviant sexuality) have been reclaimed and redefined by the non-straight community. Similarly, the word 'queer,' originally a slur, has been reclaimed by much of the community. 'Queer,' in particular, has been conceptualized as being able to speak *beyond* its origins as a slur, as well as beyond hetero- and cisnormativity in general.

The word 'queer' has been lauded as a radical term by many theorists. Eve Sedgwick says that the word 'queer' can represent "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick 8). For many people, queer is an identity that can represent many different things all at once. In a study about women who claim the label 'queer,' Wendy Peters writes:

> Queer allows for a complex and changing identity, where people locate themselves in different places at different times. It is seen as a category that can change the form of sexuality, rather than just the content. Queer, in this context, is also used as a verb, to queer. To queer is to seek to trouble, undo or unfix categories. (102)

The word queer is often used "as a way of enabling possibilities rather than guaranteeing identity or knowledge about identity" (Driver 43). The English language often fails to capture the complexities of identities outside of the hetero- and cisnormative, but the reclaimed 'queer' is a word that can represent multiple, ever-shifting identities – at least for some people. For others in the community, 'queer' is still firmly attached to its violent history as a slur. Because of that violent history and because the word 'queer' is vague in its meaning, many people still need other terms to describe their identities, which is why new linguistic categories are being created and used all the time, especially online.

Transgressive Online Spaces

But what role do online spaces actually play in identity expression and exploration? The internet has long been regarded as a place where people, especially non-straight and non-cisgender people, can more freely express and explore their identity. Cyber studies theorists have written extensively on the potential of technology and online space. In *Cyborgs, Simians and Women*, Donna Haraway argues for a reimagining of identity that involves the breaking down of boundaries and binaries, merging multiple identities in favour of a 'cyborg' identity. In particular, she calls feminists to "[embrace] the possibilities inherent in the breakdown of clean distinctions between organism and machine and similar distinctions structuring the Western self" (174). Haraway's text is thought of by some as "the foundational text for cyber studies" (Drager 25). Her work suggests that technology allows for a new sort of identity formation; one that resists binaries and revels in multiplicity. For people who don't fit neatly into categories of straight/gay and male/female, Haraway's ideas open possibilities for expressing identities that aren't normally accepted by mainstream society.

A lot of research has been done on how the internet and technology affect non-straight and non-cis people in particular. In her foundational essay, "Cyberqueer," Nina Wakeford calls cyberqueer spaces "points of resistance" against heteronormativity (408). She questions the emerging field of cyberqueer studies by asking: "Can queer identity reliably be theorized without also problematizing how it may be reconstituted or transformed by the nature of the individual cyberspace within which it is constructed?" (412). Wakeford's work examines the ways that technology and the internet affect identity, because identities are understood differently depending on the context. Expressing your identity in an online space is very different from expressing your identity in an offline space. Wakeford also resists utopian understandings of the internet by pointing out how it isn't universally accessible and therefore excludes certain marginalized or disadvantaged people. Other scholars have examined the ways that the internet affects our understandings of intimacy, particularly intimacy between non-straight and/or non-cis people. In *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality,* Shaka McGlotten examines how virtual spaces can highlight forms of intimacy that "do not fit neatly into our beliefs about how we might belong to a couple, a family, or nation" (10-11). Online spaces can also create a new sort of intimacy with the self, by generating "a textuality of the self, a written record of interior ruminations, a constant coding and decoding of the self and the other" (Rodrìguez 128). Because of its potential for new types of self-expression and intimacy, the internet is often seen by scholars as an environment where non-cis and non-straight people can challenge heteronormative and cisnormative ways of being.

Finding a community can be very difficult for non-straight and non-cis people, but the internet's ability to overcome geographical restrictions can help create new communities that aren't limited by location. For people who aren't able to move around to find others like

themselves, online communities are very important. Young people, in particular, struggle with geographical boundaries and finding community. The internet allows young non-straight and non-cis people to find like-minded peers, as well as to "try out, play with, and perform their identities and desires through provisional combinations of images, words, and narratives" (Driver 170). Because online spaces offer more anonymity and relative safety than most offline ones, online communities can become a space for exploring non-normative identities that challenge cisheteronormativity. The "fleeting, transient, ephemeral, already past" (Rodrìguez 118) nature of online communication allows people who are still figuring out their identities to do so with more freedom and fluidity. With this freedom, non-cis and non-straight people can "[complicate] the very terms through which they name their sexual and gender identities," allowing them to come up with new ways to think and talk about identity (Driver 170).

Non-cis and Non-straight People on Tumblr

While the internet has been the focus of many queer theorists, relatively little academic research has been conducted on Tumblr, especially compared to social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter.[6] Of the research that does exist, of course, a very small portion of it focuses on non-cis and non-straight Tumblr users and communities. The research that *does* relate to those communities on Tumblr often talks about Tumblr's potential to allow people to challenge and recreate mainstream narratives about being non-straight and/or non-cis. Alexander Cho coins the phrase "queer reverb" to describe the way images and affect circulate on Tumblr – nonlinearly, repetitively (44). Cho suggests that this way of communicating can possibly act as "antinormative or resistant politics" (47). Harsin Drager, for example, writes about "how trans* youth bloggers are deconstructing the dominant narrative of being born in the wrong body" (46).

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[6] A very quick search on Google Scholar for academic articles with "Tumblr" in the title yields 141 results, whereas "Twitter" yields 12100 and "Facebook" yields 17400 (as of Jan 15 2016).

The transmasculine bloggers Drager talks about are providing alternatives to mainstream understandings of transgender experience. Similarly, Marty Fink and Quinn Miller examine how trans people on Tumblr are exploring "new ways of representing the possibility of trans experience" through art and media creation (620).

While many researchers of non-cis, non-straight Tumblr often emphasize the website's potential to be subversive, there are some studies critiquing the identity politics and social justice practices on Tumblr. Parisa Zamanian examines Tumblr as a site of a "queer utopian-building effort" that fails because of the community's emphasis on identity descriptors, call-out culture, and trigger warnings (i). Lenore Bell similarly suggests that Tumblr communities don't create a safe space away from heteronormativity, but rather "[introduce] a complicated set of rules and mores that presents new complications" (31). Both of these papers discuss some important tensions that exist within these communities on Tumblr, but I disagree that Tumblr necessarily "fails" as a useful and important space for non-cis, non-straight people. In my interviews, most of my respondents were able to discuss both the good and the bad in Tumblr's non-cis, non-straight community. It's tempting to paint Tumblr with too broad a brush – a tendency that's long existed in academic critiques of 'cyberspace' in general. Rather than seeing Tumblr as utopic or dystopic; safe space or aggressive space; wholly liberating or wholly oppressive, I think it's important to look at Tumblr as an online environment with both great potential and plenty of weaknesses. In the following chapters, I hope to provide a nuanced understanding of Tumblr as a place of non-cis, non-straight community.

Chapter 3: What is Tumblr?

"I believe that, in all, Tumblr is a positive space for community and identity building, that people can use its platform to express themselves in a healthy way and that Tumblr represents the social changes that are taking place in the internet generation … Tumblr is not only for humor, but a tool for building movements."

Sarah M. Connelly, "'Welcome to the FEMINIST CULT':
Building a Feminist Community of Practice on Tumblr"

Tumblr[7] was created in 2007 by founder and CEO David Karp. It's a microblogging

platform, a type of social media website that has caused a lot of stir because of the ways it and its

user base differ from other social media. It's been called "the anti-blog" (Rifkin) and "the anti-

Facebook" (McDermott) because it seems to operate so differently from other popular social

media. With about 64% of users saying they're interested in social causes and justice, Tumblr

has also been called "a gateway drug for activism" (Safronova). Tumblr's user base is often

conceptualized as young, social justice-motivated, and difficult to understand.

In 2013, Tumblr was acquired by Yahoo! Inc. After the buyout, Time journalist Doug

Aamoth wrote a humour piece explaining how Tumblr worked:

> Greetings, old-timer. In light of the recent Yahoo-buys-Tumblr news, my overlords at
> TIME have asked me to put together a guide of sorts explaining what Tumblr is … make
> sure your Depend elastic-leg undergarments are cinched really, really tightly, because
> what you're about to read can only be fairly categorized as a technoerotic thriller.

Clearly, Tumblr has developed a reputation as a website for "weird teens" (Reeve) and a website

that older people just don't 'get'. This chapter is included as an introduction to what Tumblr is,

how it works, and how it's perceived both by its user base and everyone else.

How does Tumblr work?

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[7] I'm going to borrow a strategy from Fink and Miller (2014) in order to differentiate between Tumblr the company and individual users' blogs. Tumblr, capitalized, refers to the company, and tumblr, with no capitalization, refers to an individual blog. In their work on trans media creation, Fink and Miller make this distinction "as a way of channeling tensions between queer trans people and corporate interests" (612).

Tumblr shares many core concepts with other contemporary social media and social networking sites. On Tumblr, users can post text, pictures, videos, music, quotes, and links, and these posts can then be 'liked' or 'reblogged' by other members of the community. Each person with an account has a Dashboard, similar to a Twitter timeline or Facebook newsfeed, which shows all of the most recent activity within a person's network.

On their Dash, Tumblr users see the posts and reblogs of people they follow. 'Reblogging' is the act of re-posting the content of someone else onto your own blog. When reblogging or posting original content, users can add comments or tags. Without reblogging, they can also make replies. These are the three ways that people commonly interact with posts on Tumblr, and each type of interaction is useful in different contexts. The following image is a labelled diagram that demonstrates the parts a Tumblr post might have.
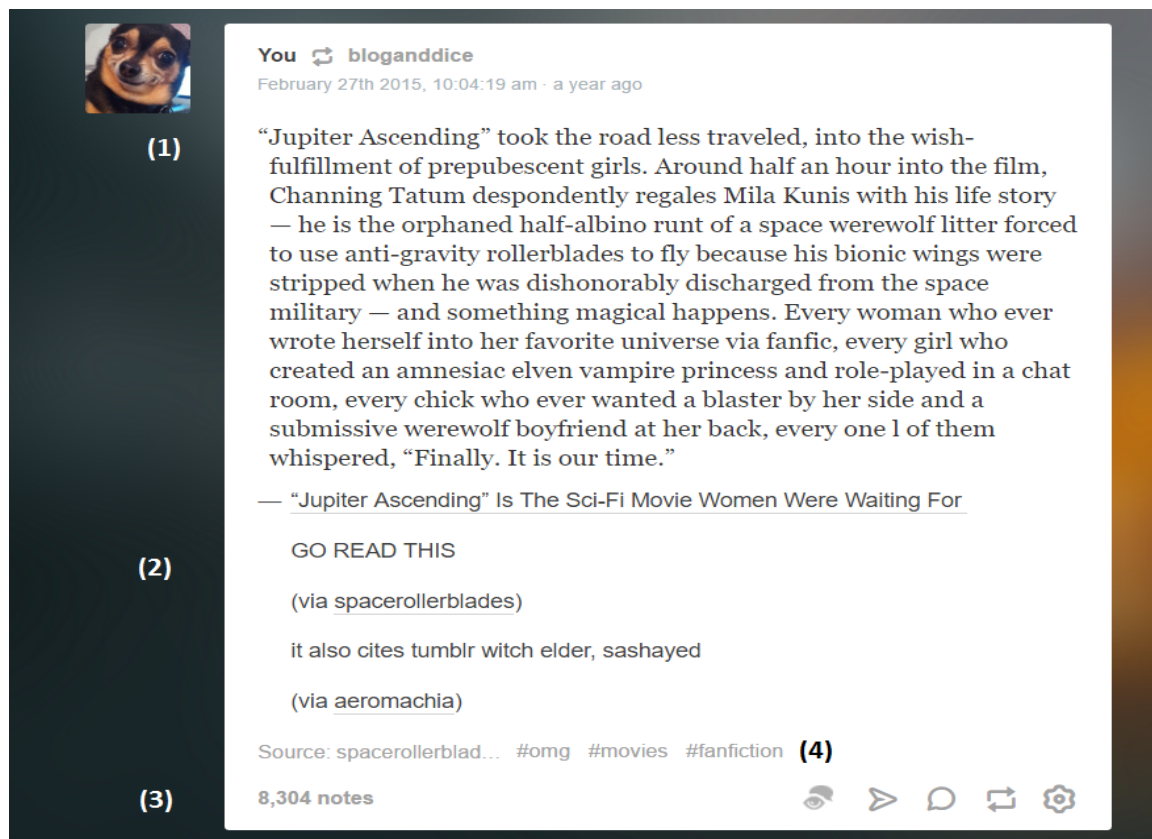

Figure 3 Example of a Tumblr post. (1) Original post text. (2) Commentary. (3) Notes, where replies can be seen. (4) Tags.

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Comments:

Comments are added to the actual original post. When reblogged, comments remain attached to the original post and visible to all who see the reblogs. Comments are often part of an ongoing discussion or conversation. They're also regularly used as funny or pithy commentary on the original post, meant for many other people to see.

Tags:

Tags are primarily used to organize posts and make them searchable by certain words, but Tumblr users often create tags that express their opinions rather than simply using tags as a system of organization. Using tags for minor or personal commentary is an 'unspoken rule' on Tumblr – if every piece of commentary were added as a comment in the reblog, the post would become overwhelmingly cluttered with unnecessary text. Tags are only seen on the post of the person who adds them. If I add tags to a post I reblog, for instance, and then someone reblogs that post from me, the tags are erased when the post shows up on their blog (and they can add their own tags).

Replies:

Replies are responses made directly to a post. They are only visible if someone views the 'notes' on a post. Replies are usually meant as a direct response to the person who made or reblogged the post.
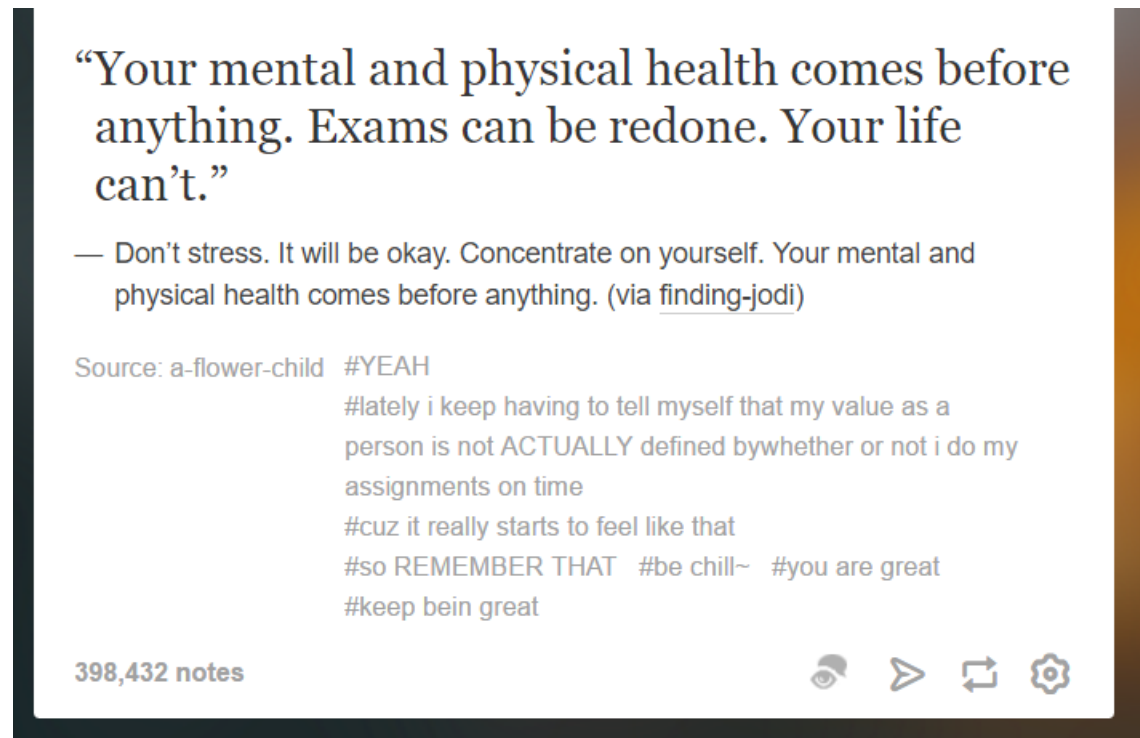
Figure 4 The tags (words preceded by a hashtag) on this post really do nothing for categorization or searchability of the post - instead, they display the user's (in this case, myself) personal reaction and commentary.

As a post gains responses, likes, and reblogs, these accumulate as 'notes', which signal the popularity of that post. These three ways of making commentary on a post all serve different functions: reblogging and adding commentary is the most public and visible, as that commentary may be circulated as widely as the post; replying is slightly less so, and acts more as a response to the person that made the post; and adding tags is more private, intended mainly for the people following you, because those tags are cleared when someone else reblogs.

Users can also communicate with one another more directly. Each blog may optionally include an Ask Box, which allows people to ask that user questions, anonymously or not. If a question is asked anonymously, the user responds publicly on their blog or not at all. Non-anonymous questions can be answered publicly on the blog or privately, like a private message. Anyone can ask anyone else a question, as long as their Ask Box is open. Users can also communicate privately through Tumblr messenger, an instant messaging system within the

platform. Tumblr is under active development, meaning its base functionality and supporting features often change (often enough that, to many users, it looks like the developers are grasping at straws).

Usernames on Tumblr are referred to as URLs, because one's username is present in the URL of their blog. Unlike websites like Facebook, Tumblr doesn't require any identity authentication. Users don't need to connect their legal names or any other information to their blog aside from an email address. They also control how much they reveal about themselves, because while many blogs include an 'About Me' page, detailed profiles aren't required on Tumblr. Tumblr thus offers a useful anonymity to its user base, who are able to express themselves openly and in diverse ways without worrying about their blog being linked to their 'real life' identity. Users are also allowed to have multiple blogs, which is useful for people that want separate blogs for separate interests. Like Tumblr, Twitter also doesn't require identity authentication, but the platform's character limits restrict Twitter users' ability to express themselves in as much detail. On Tumblr, users can be anonymous *and* express themselves in a wide variety of ways without word limits.

Typically, blogs on Tumblr can be separated into two types: individual blogs and moderated blogs. Individual blogs are, as the name suggests, run by individuals. They can have specific themes, but more often than not, these blogs are a mishmash of everything the blogger is interested in. Moderated blogs are usually run by several people and/or represent a particular organization or subject. JSTOR, a digital library of academic journals and books, has a tumblr that functions as a good example of a moderated blog with a distinct theme. Some moderated blogs aren't linked to an official organization, but are focused on a particular topic and run by several bloggers who 'moderate' and curate that blog. The tumblr 'fandomshatepeopleofcolor,' a

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blog dedicated to talking about issues of racism in different fandoms, is another example of a moderated blog. It's run by several people and focuses on a very particular subject. The moderators on these blogs also often have separate personal blogs that they use for their own personal interests.

Evolution and Buyout

In 2013, Tumblr was acquired by Yahoo! Inc., which was a source of concern for some users and created a buzz within the tech community. The changes to Tumblr's functionality trickled out slowly, with one of the first most controversial adjustments being Yahoo!'s approach to adult/18+ content. Shortly after the buyout, the new adult content policy "removed around 12 million 'adult' marked blogs from Tumblr's internal search," by making blogs flagged as 'adult' unsearchable when a person is not logged into Tumblr and also unsearchable through other engines like Google (Suri). The buyout by Yahoo! also marked the beginning of the company's attempt to monetize the platform through ad space, an attempt which has largely been a failure due to Tumblr's lack of targeted advertising potential (Edwards). Speaking as a user, the changes since the buyout mostly seem to reflect Yahoo!'s attempts to 'get the hang' of Tumblr, which have led to disorganized platform updates, buggy new features, and frustration from users.

Despite all of this, Tumblr's core functionality has remained largely the same since its launch in 2007. Tumblr remains a platform for a specific type of blogging called microblogging, which encourages short, visual posts that are circulated by users. A good comparison is that Tumblr is like long-form Twitter, with more ability to edit and add visual content to posts. The visual microblogging format fills a specific niche that Twitter cannot, mostly due to Twitter's 140 character limit and formatting of images. Despite Yahoo!'s sometimes clumsy attempts to

change and improve the website, Tumblr users haven't jumped ship, likely because there isn't

another social media platform right now that functions in the same way that Tumblr does.

Communities on Tumblr

In an article about fandom communities on Tumblr, Tom Ewing writes:

Tumblr genuinely is younger than most other social platforms, and more diverse. A greater proportion of its users are people of colour than on any other major platform. Women users make up a higher percentage than anywhere else bar Pinterest. Teenagers over-index dramatically. And while Pew and other research agencies don't tend to ask about sexuality or gender identification, LGBT visibility in Tumblr fandom is very high. What looks to dim outsiders as some kind of obsession with "social justice" often just springs from people talking about themselves, their lives and the shit that happens to them.

Tumblr is often thought of as a social media platform for younger people, and much

demographic research reflects this. Like Ewing writes, the non-straight and non-cis community

on Tumblr is especially visible. Tumblr is often viewed as overly focused on social justice, with

a large population of 'entitled' and 'oversensitive' millennials. Forums like r/TumblrInAction, a

sub-forum on Reddit[8], are devoted to ridiculing people on Tumblr who take their opinions about

social justice (or, as Ewing more accurately writes, "people talking about themselves, their lives

and the shit that happens to them") to an "extreme." On r/TumblrInAction, screenshots of

people's blog posts are often posted for everyone to make fun of. The users that are featured

often also become the victims of anonymous bullying via hateful personal messages. These

messages range from hurtful comments, to violent images, to suicide-baiting.

While it's true that there is a strong focus on social justice on Tumblr, it's impossible to

talk about the 'Tumblr community' as if it's in any way unified or coherent. Even small

communities on the platform are amorphous. There are no boundaries between different

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[8] Reddit is a website that hosts user-generated news and entertainment content. Users can submit text posts or links, which can then be commented on by the rest of the community.

communities and no requirements or processes for 'joining' a particular Tumblr community. A

sense of belonging to a community is, instead, mostly based around who is following who and

who sees what.

On Tumblr, I consider myself a part of a range of communities: the LGBTQ+ community

in general, the bi and wlw (woman-loving women) community specifically, the academic

community (also called 'studyblr'), the mental health/self-care community, and the reading

community (or 'bookblr') are just a few examples. I follow some blogs specifically dedicated to

these interests, like the official GLAAD tumblr, and I also follow individuals who are part of

these communities. The individuals I follow are part of other communities that I don't consider

myself a part of, but that I'm granted some access to through what they post and reblog. For

instance, I might follow someone because they're a bisexual woman who blogs about fiction, but

they also happen to be very active in the Marvel fandom. I don't consider myself a part of that

community, but through following someone who is, I still get glimpses of it. Communities on

Tumblr are connected loosely in this way, and such communities often start to blend together and

overlap. While I often talk about 'non-cis, non-straight Tumblr,' it's important to remember that

non-cis and/or non-straight users aren't united in their opinions or usage habits.

Tumblr as a Transgressive Space

Because of the uniqueness of the platform and the user base that it attracts, Tumblr has

the potential to act as a transgressive space for marginalized groups. Tumblr does seem to attract

a genuinely different demographic than most social networking sites, and it has gained a

reputation for having a lot of content related to social justice. Something about the ways Tumblr

functions and how it has come to be perceived by users makes it particularly appealing to people

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interested in social issues and, arguably, a particularly useful platform for marginalized people who want to talk about their experiences.

Bryce J. Renninger writes that Tumblr is a particularly good platform for "counterpublic communication" (1513). Renninger is referencing Nancy Fraser's idea of counterpublics, which are "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser 67). Renninger isolates six features of Tumblr which make it different from other social networking sites and, therefore, more conducive to counterpublic communication. They are as follows: (1) commentary on Tumblr is de-emphasized by the reblog system, giving mean-spirited comments less focus; (2) 'trolling' is de-incentivized by the reblog/commentary system; (3) it's easy to find the original creator of a post, making it easier to find people to follow and connect with; (4) there is "near equivalent" emphasis on all posts, including posts by new users, compared to websites that specifically promote popular posts; (5) there is the possibility for private and anonymous messaging; and (6) hashtags allow for counterpublic discussions to be better organized and searchable (1523-24). Renninger presents these six features alongside three dynamics of social networking sites discussed by danah boyd: "invisible/unknowable audiences, collapsed contexts, and the blurring of public and private" (Renninger 1523). Renninger's work emphasizes the fact that Tumblr allows people of marginalized identities to find others like them, communicate with them easily, while giving them some protection from 'trolls' or online bullies. As such, Tumblr becomes a site of considerable counterpublic communication.

In Chapter 5, I discuss further why Tumblr is a useful platform for discussions about identity, but other scholars like Renninger have also examined why Tumblr hosts so many

discussions about social justice and marginalization. Renninger is not the only one to highlight the reblog system and the unique circulation of content. As Sarah M. Connelly points out, the way information is spread on Tumblr has made it a great platform for discussions about feminism: "Tumblr was not intended to be a location for feminist dialogue, but its structure as a micro-blogging platform is well-suited to entertaining both meaningful, deep dialogue and short quips of humor used to belittle and undermine patriarchal ideology" (42). In Nichole Nicholson's article about femme identity expression on Tumblr, she similarly cites the importance of the reblog function, because of the way it aids the dissemination of transgressive expressions of gender. Nicholson references Judith Butler's concept of performativity and points to femme as a performative identity, claiming that "as [femme] selfies proliferate, circulate, and receive social affirmation in the form of likes and reblogs, an identity is constructed around the stylized presentation" (74). As Renninger, Connelly, and Nicholson all demonstrate, Tumblr lends itself to transgressive acts and countercultural expressions because of the way it gathers people together and circulates the content they create.

Tumblr can also be conceptualized as an example of Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec's concept of 'heterotopia.' The authors define heterotopias as being "something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted," and as places that are "outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" (24). Other scholars have used the term to talk about queer heterotopias specifically. Angela Jones calls queer heterotopias "sites of empowerment [that] always exist in relation to heteronormative spaces and are shaped by them," but that also "exist in opposition to heteronormative spaces and are spaces where individuals seek to disrupt heterosexist discourses"

(1). The non-cis and non-straight communities on Tumblr exist in relation to and opposition to heteronormativity, but like heterotopias, they are also outside of it. The discussions on Tumblr about non-cis, non-straight identity call attention to societal assumptions about gender and desire, but also do more than just denaturalize and deconstruct – they create alternatives. Non-cis and non-straight people on Tumblr are creating spaces for themselves by deconstructing *and* rebuilding concepts of gender and desire, and they are rebuilding it to suit their own needs. I examine this 'rebuilding' in greater detail in Chapter 5, specifically in relation to neo-identities.

Tumblr's potential for counterpublic communication and its potential to act as a heterotopia are what make it such an ideal online environment for conversations about neo-identities. The rapid circulation of information due to the reblog system also allows the content being circulated to be remixed and reused in different ways, mobilized for different causes, and interpreted differently depending on tags and blog context. Neo-identities and associated conversations can be shared with a like-minded community that cannot exist at such scale offline. As Renninger points out, Tumblr's protections against trolling and bullying similarly help foster a thoughtful and progressive environment. That said, Tumblr is not a utopian space free from interlopers or community in-fighting.

Critique and Backlash against Neo-identities

Tumblr may act as a transgressive space that encourages identity expression and exploration, but the platform does not protect neo-identity users from facing severe backlash from people who don't see their identities as legitimate. The neo-identities being created and discussed on Tumblr regularly receive a lot of criticism and hatred, both from outside the community and within it. Chapter 5 examines the details of how this backlash specifically affects individuals, but the broader conversations surrounding neo-identities are also important to

examine. These conversations, happening both on and off Tumblr, shape the landscape within which neo-identity users come out, express themselves, and live as non-cis, non-straight people. People who use neo-identities cannot avoid criticisms and backlash against their identities, their language, and their experiences. Skepticism and hatred directed at neo-identities often means some neo-identity users never 'come out' except on Tumblr. As mentioned in Chapter 1, some of the skepticism about neo-identities comes down to the false assumption that neo-identities are a new phenomenon, and therefore doomed to disappear as young people "grow out of" these feelings. That belief is only one element of the negative response to these identities. The backlash against neo-identities manifests in a wide variety of ways and through a wide variety of rationalizations.

When criticism comes from outside the non-cis, non-straight community, it usually takes a familiar form. In 2015, Billy Crystal said gay scenes on TV were "pushing it a little far for [his] tastes," and that complaint is an echo of a popular homophobic protest: 'You can be gay, as long as you don't shove it in my face' (Wilstein). This criticism is directed at all non-cis, non-straight identities, but it's also regularly revised to apply specifically to neo-identities. Because they require explanation and conversation since they aren't well-known, neo-identities are in many ways considered too conspicuous. This is, in part, because neo-identities call into question mainstream ideas of gender and attraction and, in doing so, threaten cisheteronormativity. Criticisms of neo-identities are often wrapped in pretend acceptance and false concern; people who make these criticisms insist that they care about "legitimate" non-cis, non-straight people, and that people using neo-identities are undermining the legitimacy of other non-cis and non-straight people. This belief is demonstrated in one of the Urban Dictionary definitions for the derogatory term 'transtrender,' a word often applied to trans people who use neo-identities:

> One who creates a ridiculously specific non-binary gender identity for themselves, and often repeatedly changes it, because it's seemingly the trendy thing to do. Often found on Tumblr.
>
> Theoretically, they should be easy to criticise because what they do trivialises the struggles of people who are actually transgender. However, in practice, they are above criticism because calling them out on their bullshit often results in you being called a bigot. ("Transtrender (3)")

This false concern is especially insidious, because it masquerades transphobia and homophobia as acceptance. Criticisms like this cut down some non-cis and non-straight people while claiming to be protect others.

The 'trendiness' argument against neo-identities is related to the characterization of people who use neo-identities as spoiled, oversensitive, and self-absorbed young people. In addition to ignoring the fact that people who use neo-identities are not always teenagers or young adults, this criticism relies on a lazy stereotype of teens and "millennials." Millennials are generally considered selfish, sheltered, and too reliant on technology, especially by older people. Their selfies represent their narcissism; their multiple social media accounts represent their inability to connect with others except through a screen. In Time's "Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation," Joel Stein actually writes about the virtues of millennials, but nonetheless calls them "lazy, entitled, selfish and shallow." These are usually the same kind of character attacks levelled at people using neo-identities. Neo-identities are occasionally simply characterized as a consequence of the millennial mindset. The surprisingly popular website "Age of Shitlords" takes aim at advocates of social justice, particularly those on Tumblr, by posting articles about people who take issues like feminism, gender, and body positivity 'too far.' The writers regularly weigh in on the issue of neo-identities:

> It seems like every day, millennials find new ways to feel unique and different. Special Snowflake Syndrome is running rampant and with it comes the need to invent new things to make themselves stand out and "out-oppress" their peers. (STSAdmin)

Again, neo-identities are conceptualized here as an attempt to be 'special' and a symptom of a coddled, selfish generation.
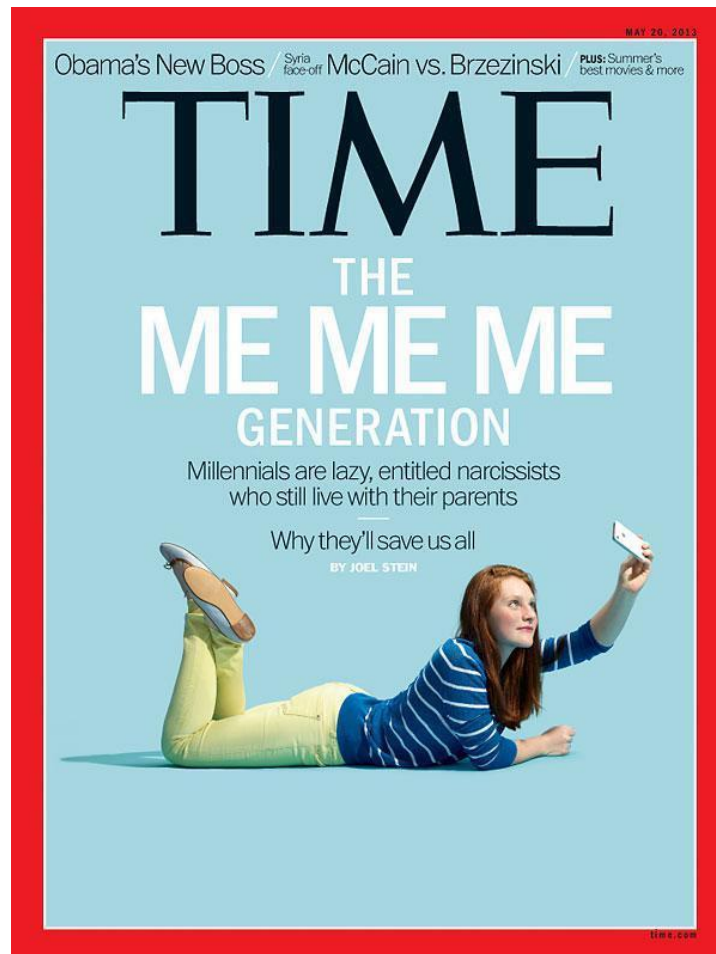
Figure 5 "The Me Me Me Generation" issue of Time Magazine

Some outside criticism of neo-identities takes a less severe form than this. Because some more mainstream websites have started picking up on neo-identities and other identity discussions on Tumblr, criticism sometimes appears on more popular news and entertainment websites. When these articles do appear, they often present the point of view of a curious, pseudo-objective observer, like a field scientist. In a Gawker article called "From Otherkin[9] to

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[9] Otherkin individuals consider themselves to be at least partially non-human. They relate part of their identity to something non-human, though the way they experience that non-human part of their identity varies widely.

Transethnicity[10]: Your Field Guide to the Weird World of Tumblr Identity Politics," Max Read

provides what he presumably thinks is a fair assessment of the "weird" identities on Tumblr. The

article isn't explicitly hateful and doesn't take a definitive stance on otherkin identity, but Read

comes to the conclusion that maybe many of these individuals are just "weird kid[s]" and/or

"clearly sick or hurt in other ways." Articles like this assume a position of superiority that's often

ageist and ableist. While otherkin identities aren't the same as non-cis and non-straight identities,

the same ideas are often applied to non-cis/non-straight neo-identities (in a particularly hateful

article, the writers at "Age of Shitlords" call Tumblr "an asylum for the mentally ill" because of

the range of sexual and gender identities). Of course, these ideas have been applied to non-cis

and non-straight identities for years. The medicalization of non-cis and non-straight people, and

the attempts of cis and straight people to delegitimize them under the guise of medical help, is

nothing new.

Criticisms that come from within the non-cis and non-straight community aren't always

that different from the ones that come from outsiders. While some cis and straight people might

say they support gay people as long as they aren't "too out there," some non-cis and non-straight

people take a similar position in order to gain the approval of outsiders. Trying to prove that

we're the "same" as straight or cis people is a way of protecting ourselves from discrimination,

but it throws other non-cis and non-straight people under the bus. The LGBTQ+ rights

movement's focus on gay marriage exemplifies this position:

> The fight for gay marriage suggested that the gay community had grown up, left its radical
> past behind and was ready to join mainstream society as a reputable partner. It dismantled the

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[10] While Read's article is disrespectful to many communities on Tumblr, the concept of transethnicity (where a person feels they are born into the wrong race) is racist and definitely worthy of criticism, though this isn't the kind of criticism present in Read's article. This shouldn't be confused with the important stories and experiences of transracial adoptees, who can struggle with growing up in a family whose race doesn't match their own. For further reading on the appropriation of the term 'transracial,' see "An Open Letter: Why Co-opting 'Transracial' in the Case of Rachel Dolezal is Problematic" by Kimberly McKee, et al.

hypersexual, flamboyant gay stereotype and replaced it with a more wholesome image that mainstream America found more palatable … As 'mainstream' white gay culture has become not only socially accepted, but also widely marketed and commercialized, middle and upper class gay interests have become inseparably intertwined with the gentrification of historically gay spaces and the criminalization of poor, non-white, transgender and homeless individuals within these spaces. (Walmsley)

Saying "I'm not like the others" is a way of protecting oneself from discrimination, but it's extremely damaging to the community as a whole.

Trans exclusionary radical feminists (or TERFs), for example, exist within the non-straight community and direct a lot of criticism at trans people. TERFs claim that trans identities are illegitimate and refuse to respect or acknowledge their identities. Not all TERFs are non-straight, and they also don't direct their vitriol exclusively at neo-identity users, but their critiques of trans identities do often include neo-identities.

Another example of criticism coming from within the community is the commentary that comes from transmedicalists or transfundamentalists. Online, this group is often referred to as 'truscum.'[11] Transmedicalists believe in a very particular narrative of being trans, and they promote the idea that trans people are "born into the wrong body" and require full medical transition (including surgery and hormone treatments). As Harsin Drager points out: "While some individuals may feel that they were tragically born into the wrong body and that a change in physical sex will solve the majority of their dysphoria, this is not the only narrative of gender non-conformity" (50). Transmedicalists don't believe that people who don't experience classic dysphoria can be trans. Contrary to this belief, though, there are trans people who feel comfortable with the physical characteristics of their body and don't want to undergo surgery or other treatment. Their discomfort is with the gender they were assigned at birth, rather than with

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[11] 'Truscum' is a pejorative term coined by Tumblr user transstingray, who has since deleted their blog. The exact etymology of the word is uncertain, but 'tru' likely comes from "True Transsexuals" – trans people who consider only certain experiences of transness to be legitimate.

the body they have. Transmedicalists label those who don't experience dysphoria as "not really trans," and this often includes non-binary people. Truscum "attempt, consciously or unconsciously, to discredit and marginalise other members of the transgender community in order to appear acceptable to people with cishet privilege, thus conforming to cisnormative standards as much as possible" ("Truscum"). Again, this is often a case of marginalized people trying to separate themselves from those in their community that are deemed 'less palatable' to the mainstream. As Thomas Caramagno writes, "Group identities tend to marginalize desires that do not fit the approved image" (128). In the end, though, these tactics only reinforce the transphobic and cissexist ideals held by the mainstream, rather than truly challenging cisnormativity and inequality.

Neo-identity users aren't protected by the transgressive potential of Tumblr or the internet. Having a platform where they can connect with and be seen by others can be extremely helpful to non-cis and non-straight people, but it can also allow outsiders to come into these 'safe spaces' to pass judgement, make criticisms, and be hateful. I consider it important to examine the backlash against neo-identities, because this backlash is perhaps some of the strongest proof that neo-identities challenge historically-accepted, oppressive ideas about gender and desire. In Chapter 5, I will also describe the way my interviewees personally experience this backlash.

Dismissing neo-identities as a product of millennial immaturity or narcissism isn't harmless. What's at stake, here, is the ability of people (especially young people and marginalized people) to identify themselves and be the authorities on their own identities. Denying people that right has far-reaching consequences for many different marginalized groups. This behaviour perpetuates the idea that non-cis, non-straight people don't know who they are or what they want, and instead need to be told (by cishet people) who they can and should be.

Basing skepticism about neo-identities on the idea that they're only used by young people is not only inaccurate but another dangerous stereotype; again, it suggests that young people (especially youth from disadvantaged groups) don't have the ability to know themselves and communicate their experiences. In other words, they can't be trusted.

Chapter 4: The Ethics of Embedded Research on Tumblr

"One such way in which to redress the exclusion of 'the Other' and 'give voice' to those who have been silenced and shut out is of course, not only the inclusion of marginalized groups but also the fostering of conditions that would allow these groups to 'speak'. Here, what comes to mind are qualitative methods such as the interview process where researcher/researched are mindful and ever vigilant about the power dynamics and 'distortion of interpretation' that might emerge."

<div align="right">

Corie Hammers & Allen D. Brown III, "Towards a feminist–queer
alliance: a paradigmatic shift in the research process"

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As a person doing research about a marginalized community, it's very important to me to be transparent, both about my intentions as a researcher and my own identity. Because that transparency is so important, I think an autoethnographic reflection on my own position, identity, and motives is a useful way to start a chapter about methodology. Researchers often promote the myth of objectivity: the researcher, in their work, is expected to be removed from their subject matter so that they can present it objectively, without bias. History has shown us that this is impossible. We can never truly be free of our own biases. Our identity – as researchers and as people – is always going to influence the way we engage with our subjects, the way we interpret our findings, and the way we talk about our work. Rather than trying to resist this inevitability, I'd like to embrace it, by continually examining the ways my identity influences my research. In some ways, my identity will be useful to me and make it easier to navigate areas of my research. In other ways, my identity will limit me. As E. Harsin Drager writes in "Trans*forming Cyberspace and the Trans Liberation Movement": "[M]y understanding is limited by my identity and experiences. I can never fully understand or unravel all of the facets and components of my research subjects' identities" (17).

Before beginning my research, I was already an active Tumblr user, familiar with certain parts of the non-cis and non-straight community on the website. I've been using Tumblr since

2013. Being active on the platform and within the non-straight community not only helped me decide what I wanted to research, but it helped me understand how best to research it. Tumblr is a difficult social media platform to learn and keep up with, so being active on the website makes it easier to understand, navigate, and study. Knowing how Tumblr works also makes conversations with my interviewees easier.

I'm also an openly queer woman who identifies as bisexual, so I'm a part of an offline LGBTQ+ community, and I'm familiar with interacting with other community members, especially when it comes to issues of social justice. I feel a strong personal connection to my research topic. While many people might discourage this kind of personal connection and involvement, because it creates a stronger bias, I feel that it's helped me in my work. My identity helps me prioritize respect and understanding; it also reminds me of what's at stake, because I'm part of the community that I'm researching.

These are reasons that I can consider myself an 'insider' in the community I'm researching, but there are also ways that I recognize myself as an outsider. Recognizing myself as an outsider is also recognizing my privilege. I've had the opportunity to be involved in academia for several years, which means I have access to resources that many people don't have. I'm also privileged because I'm cisgender, meaning I identify with the gender I was assigned at birth (female). Unlike my interviewees, I don't claim any 'uncommon' identity labels. When I tell someone I'm bisexual, they usually understand what I mean without me having to explain – a privilege that many of the people I interview don't have. I'm also white and able-bodied. For those reasons, my understanding of the way certain marginalized identities and types of oppression intersect is limited. I can't understand all of the experiences of my participants, who occupy a range of different identities. All of the participants identify as non-cis, which is not

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something I expected but something that's important to remember, because I'm a cisgender person and I don't experience transphobia. It's important for me to be continually examining my point of view, and it's also my responsibility to check-in with my participants to ensure that my work is respectful and accurate.

Much of my research involves the simple observation of non-cis and non-straight neo-identity users on Tumblr. Initially used by anthropologist Frank Hamilton Cushing, the participant observation method traditionally involves an 'outsider'-positioned researcher who integrates themselves into the cultural context they are studying (Kawulich 5), but researchers engaging in participant observation can occupy various insider/outsider positions. Patricia and Peter Adler describe three positions of observational researchers within the groups they study: peripheral member researchers (no participation within the group), active member researchers (participation without full commitment to group values), and complete member researchers (already members of the group they are studying) (Adler & Adler 379-380). The spectrum of researcher identities presented by the Adlers is not sufficient to describe my position as a researcher. Sonya Corbin Dwyer and Jennifer L. Buckle present the 'insider-outsider' position as an alternative to traditional researcher membership roles. The term 'insider-outsider' signifies the ways that researchers can be both insiders and outsiders within the communities they study. Because of the range of identities I claim, and the ways they give me access to (or exclude me from) certain communities, I think of myself as having this "insider-outsider" position. In the term 'insider-outsider', "[the] hyphen can be viewed not as a path but as a dwelling place for people. This hyphen acts as a third space, a space between, a space of paradox, ambiguity, and ambivalence, as well as conjunction and disjunction" (Dwyer and Buckle 60). Dwyer and Buckle suggest that researchers are always insider-outsiders: "We may be closer to the insider position

or closer to the outsider position, but because our perspective is shaped by our position as a researcher (which includes having read much literature on the research topic), we cannot fully occupy one or the other of those positions" (61). I agree with this assertion. Experiences differ so vastly that no one can be a 'perfect insider'; experiences overlap enough that no one is ever a total outsider, either. That said, being a partial insider has its advantages and often goes a long way in making community members more comfortable with the research being conducted.

In recognizing the different facets of my identity and how they influence my research perspective, I hope to avoid making mistakes that will alienate me from the people I'm researching. By being continually aware of my position and my privilege, I want to make my work accessible and respectful. Of course, many people have pointed out that 'recognizing your privilege' only goes so far, and for many people, recognizing privileges often ends up being "little more than a chance to pat yourself on the back for being so 'aware'" (McKenzie). In order to avoid falling into this kind of trap, I've made an effort to continuously re-examine my position and my intentions, and I've also made an effort to be open to criticisms from the community I'm studying. It's inevitable that I will make mistakes, but my hope is to be aware enough that my mistakes are few and, when I do make mistakes, to accept criticism gracefully and put all my energy towards improving. My plan, my theoretical position, and my ideas have changed substantially throughout the process of writing this paper, and I like to think that being open to those changes has shaped the project positively.

Stylistic Accessibility

Creating accessible academic work is a project close to my heart and an important aspect of my methodology. Unfortunately, writing about complicated concepts like gender, sexuality, and identity in an accessible way, without relying too heavily on jargon, can be very difficult.

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Remembering the audience I wanted to reach helped me make decisions about how to write this paper. Angelika Bammer suggests that academic writers should look to the carpentry concept of "truing," which means to make something in a precise and specific way that fits its intended purpose: "This means that in addition to being true on the level of content, we also need to be true on the level of form. How to do so – how to true our writing – is for each of us the task at hand" (69). The form of our writing, of our work, should be directly related to the audience we're trying to reach. I've tried to "true" my writing by making it accessible, because I want the people I'm talking about in my work to be able to read it with ease, whether or not they're also involved in academia.

Academic disciplines like queer theory and gender studies are important to my work. They provide the theoretical groundwork required to think analytically about neo-identities and cisheteronormativity. The difficulty and density of some queer and gender studies theory is often important to its message, because the goal of this writing is to unpack complicated concepts like gender; to denaturalize them by making their constructed nature obvious. That said, I'm troubled by the consequences of speaking and writing a language that can't be understood by the people I'm writing about – a language that I've only learned because I've been lucky enough to gain access to academic resources and guidance.

In this work, I try to balance a commitment to the accessibility of my writing with a respect for theoretical tradition. I try to acknowledge many 'ways of knowing,' the many places critical analysis can come from: activists, academics, writers, artists, bloggers. I engage with all of these sources throughout my paper. I also know firsthand that conversations happening in non-cis, non-straight communities on Tumblr are often already very reliant on theoretical concepts and scholarly work. Because the conversations are happening in a non-academic space,

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participants have to account for people in the community that don't have the same academic knowledge.[12] I want to negotiate this tension in my work in the way it's negotiated online: by striving for accessibility even when it's difficult and by trying to find the practical applications of the theory I reference. Connecting theoretical concepts to lived realities is important to me as someone interested in dismantling systematic oppression and making real-world changes. I've tried to write in a way that's accessible to people outside of academia. Being open to feedback and willing to change has been essential to this process. This project is meant to be part of an ongoing conversation that includes many voices, within and outside of academia. I've also left all interview quotes as they were originally written. Sometimes interviewees wrote their answers in ways that don't conform to traditional academic standards. I've left their phrasing untouched and, other than this brief note, unremarked upon, because I believe that many ways of writing and speaking are equally legitimate.

Content Analysis

In an article about the blurring of public and private online, Anil Dash wonders:

What if the public speech on Facebook and Twitter is more akin to a conversation happening between two people at a restaurant? Or two people speaking quietly at home, albeit near a window that happens to be open to the street? And if more than a billion people are active on various social networking applications each week, are we saying that there are now a billion public figures? When did we agree to let media redefine everyone who uses social networks as fair game, with no recourse and no framework for consent?

Dash is talking about online journalism's tendency to rely on social media posts to support their stories, generally without the consent of the people they're quoting. Information posted publicly

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[12] They don't always do so successfully, of course. One person I interviewed, Illya, said: "I also think I have some trouble communicating with [the LGBTQ community on Tumblr] due to not 'speaking the same language' of academic queer/feminist theory (I come from a science background.)" Even in non-academic spaces, accessibility remains an issue; Tumblr is not a utopia exempt from these problems.

online is considered, as Dash puts it, 'fair game,' and the same is true in academia. For the most part, it's ethically acceptable to quote and republish publicly posted information, because that information is already accessible to all. Unfortunately, this framework ignores the fact that the line between public and private space is becoming increasingly blurred as much of our communication moves onto social media.

Part of my research involved analyzing and referencing information posted on Tumblr and other social media/chatrooms that complicate notions of privacy. When people post on Tumblr, they often do so with the expectation that very few people will read their words. On Tumblr, people regularly post about the intimate details of their personal lives and, in doing so, they're trusting the people who read their posts to be respectful of them, their experiences, and their privacy. Bloggers might use tags like "#do not reblog" to let people know the content of their post is personal and not meant for general consumption. There's nothing built into Tumblr that keeps people from seeing or reblogging those posts; again, bloggers are simply trusting their followers to respect their wishes. Paul B. de Laat writes that the practice of "assuming trust is the basic mode of operation in online diaries," rather than trust based on evidence (57). Users that assume trust aren't necessarily naïve, either. Most of them have personal experience with trolls and online bullying, but still have faith in their followers to respect their wishes.

These unwritten etiquette rules make Tumblr a particularly difficult place to conduct academic research. There's nothing technically stopping researchers from quoting any posts regardless of content or context, just like there's nothing stopping trolls or bullies from disregarding the rules that bloggers set out. That said, academic researchers have a responsibility to protect the people they study. Considering online writing 'fair game' just because it's publicly available is an overly simplistic solution to a complicated issue.

In my own research, I made an explicit effort not to quote personal, 'private' posts without the permission of the person making them. Posts containing intimate information about someone's life, posts clearly intended to be personal, and posts that explicitly state things like "do not reblog" are off-limits. When I do quote Tumblr posts, if it's not with permission of the author, it's because those posts are clearly meant to be a part of an ongoing public dialogue about an issue and are meant to be read by a large audience. Making this distinction can sometimes be difficult; I relied on clues like the unironic inclusion of words/phrases like PSA ('Public Service Announcement'), long posts with links/information meant as educational resources, and other markers that suggested posts were meant for general consumption. When in doubt, I erred on the side of caution. The ability to make this distinction comes in part from being very familiar with Tumblr, engaging in what Clifford Geertz calls "deep hanging out," a strategy Parisa Zamanian similarly used in her academic study of Tumblr (5). "Deep hanging out" involves immersing oneself in a particular culture or community. I used Tumblr before beginning my academic research on it, but during the research I also spent a lot of time browsing blogs and tags that I might not normally look at, in order to better familiarize myself with Tumblr practices. Doing this made it easier to understand what kinds of posts could truly be considered 'public' rather than personal.

Interviews

Too often, research on marginalized, vulnerable communities ends up being condescending or voyeuristic despite good intentions. My hope in conducting this research was in part to consider how language can challenge damaging cultural norms, but also to give people an opportunity to talk about their identities and experiences. As such, interviews were an essential component of the project. Conducting them through email was also important, not only

because I felt the participants would feel more comfortable and safe communicating through text, but because text-based interviews give people time to thoughtfully consider and compose their answers (Kinach & Crichton; Kivits). Having the people I interviewed express their thoughts and ideas in their own words and with adequate time to reflect was important to the process. Structured email interviews allow participants "to write about themselves in uninterrupted and solitary ways (similar to diary style entries but directed towards others) … [facilitating] opportunities for slow experiential reflection and interpretive risk taking inhibited by face-to-face conversations and focus groups" (Driver 53).

For this paper, I interviewed 9 non-cis and/or non-straight Tumblr users about their use of neo-identities and their experience on Tumblr. I recruited participants by making a text post on Tumblr, inviting people to contact me to participate, and also by privately contacting Tumblr users that were eligible for the study. Interviews typically took place over several days, mostly due to different time zones and work/school commitments. In the interviews, I asked participants about their use of neo-identities, how they discovered those labels, how people reacted to them, and other questions about their identity language and general use of Tumblr.

Figure 6 Recruitment ad posted on Tumblr

Another important aspect of the interview process was continuous, informed consent. I wanted my project to be something participants felt good about having been a part of; at no point did I want anyone to read what had been written about them and feel misrepresented or unfairly judged. To avoid that discomfort or regret, my consent process included three stages: (1) the initial consent form, before the start of the interview; (2) the first consent check-in, where participants were given a censored copy of the Chapter 5 (the results section) draft and asked to approve the use of their quotes; (3) the final consent check-in, where participants were given a full draft of the paper and asked to confirm their consent for the final time. In part (2) of the continuous consent process, the censored drafts given to participants only showed their own

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personal quotes. Quotes from other participants were paraphrased to keep the draft anonymous until consent was confirmed from all 9 interviewees. Taking these precautions meant trying to make the project a collaboration between myself and the people I interviewed, rather than seeing interviewees as passive research subjects. If any participant became uncomfortable with the project, they were able to withdraw and have their information removed.

The first check-in led to revisions based on my own mistakes and misunderstandings. In some cases, the changes were small edits, but other changes required more investment. One participant named Kay brought my attention to a section of the paper that ne[13] felt didn't represent a particular issue fairly. Kay and I discussed the section until I felt I was able to appropriately revise it, at which point Kay approved my revisions, though we still had to agree to disagree on some ideas. Kay's feedback allowed me to make my explanations more even-handed; ne presented a perspective that I hadn't accounted for on my own. Having this check-in and revision period, though, allowed us to have that discussion and allowed me to learn from it. It also helped me overcome some of my own limitations as a writer, because of my limited perspective. The combined perspective of all my participants helped me improve the paper.

Participants

The response to my recruitment ad was more enthusiastic than I anticipated. Because neo-identity users are a small subsection of the Tumblr community, I expected to interview maybe three people, and I ended up with nine complete interviews. In some ways, this was a very diverse group of people. Ages ranged from 17 to 31, several interviewees lived with mental illness or physical disabilities, and orientations varied greatly. All of the people I interviewed are non-cis, and they used a variety of different gender labels. Unfortunately, the group was

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[13] Kay's pronouns are ne/nem/nir.

somewhat less diverse in other ways: only 3 out of 9 interviewees were non-white. The project

would have benefitted from more participants who were people of colour, and this is definitely

an area of the research that requires further development. It is my hope that future research in

this area will be even more inclusive.

In order to introduce the people I interviewed, the last part of this section is devoted to

short bios describing all the participants and their various identity words. The ages listed

represent the age of participants at the time of the interview. Participants chose the names they

wanted me to use in my work; these names are pseudonyms, nicknames, or online handles,

depending on what each participant was most comfortable using.

Andy – [no age given; 16+] – Latina/Indian – pansexual, panromantic, demigirl – she/her/hers

Andy is pansexual and panromantic (sexually and romantically attracted to all genders), and is a demigirl. People who are demigender feel they are mostly one gender, but are also partially another or several others. For Andy, 'demigirl' means that she is primarily a woman but part of her could also be genderfluid or agender. She considers herself to still be questioning.

Devin – 23 – African American/Black – queer, genderfluid – he/him/his and she/her/hers

Devin uses the word 'queer' to describe his attraction to multiple genders. He's also genderfluid, which means his gender is "constantly moving & in motion." Devin uses both she/her/hers pronouns and he/him/his pronouns.

Hatch – 17 – white – pansexual, nebularomantic, dependromantic, borderfluid – go/gore/gores

Hatch uses go/gore/gores/goreself pronouns, which both reflect gore sense of gender and gore personal love for gore and horror. Hatch is pansexual (sexually attracted to all genders) and both nebularomantic and dependromantic. Nebularomantic means go can't determine the difference between platonic and romantic attraction because of mental illness, and dependromantic refers to the fact that Hatch only gets crushes on people that gore mental illness makes gore dependent on. Hatch is also borderfluid:

> It means that I use multiple (10+) gender identities to describe myself because I have borderline personality disorder, and because of that I have a bad sense of identity and I kinda grasp at anything I can to specify who I am.

Hyourin – 18 – white – asexual, idemromantic, recipromantic, agender – they/them/theirs

In terms of attraction, Hyourin is asexual, idemromantic, and recipromantic. Idemromantic means Hyourin doesn't feel a noticeable difference between romantic and platonic attraction, and recipromantic means they only feel romantic attraction towards someone once they know that person is romantically attracted to them. Hyourin is also agender, which refers to being genderlessness or without gender.

Illya – 24 – white – pansexual/bisexual/asexual, neutrois – they/them/theirs

Illya sometimes refers to themselves as pansexual/bisexual, but they very rarely experience sexual attraction, so they also use asexual. Illya is also neutrois, which is a gender that's neither male or female and often considered 'neutral.' Sometimes Illya uses 'gender neutral' instead of neutrois, for people who don't know the word neutrois.

Kay – 26 – white – asexual, akoiromantic, agender – ne/nem/nir

Kay is asexual and akoiromantic. For Kay, akoiromantic means that ne rarely experiences romantic attraction, but when ne does, it goes away once ne knows the feeling is reciprocated. Kay is also agender, which refers to feeling genderless or without gender. Kay uses ne/nem/nir/nemself pronouns.

Niamh – 19 – white – pansexual, demi-heteroromantic/grey-aro, not-cis – she/her/hers[14]

Niamh is pansexual and heteroromantic, but also feels they she is on the aromantic spectrum, "somewhere along the lines of demiromantic or grey aromantic." Niamh is non-cis but hasn't found an accurate word to properly describe her gender. The closest fits are greygender and gender apathetic (these refer to having some sense of gender but not being invested in it or feeling gender very strongly).

Roe – 19 – Indian – pansexual, grey-aro/panromantic, genderqueer – they/them/theirs

Roe is pansexual and panromantic, but also grey-aromantic because they rarely experience romantic attraction. Roe is also genderqueer, which refers to a gender that is outside conventional ideas of being wholly male or wholly female.

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[14] The information in this paper represents the identity words used by Niamh at the time of the interview. Since then, Niamh has started using the word non-binary.

Vee – 31 – white – bisexual gray-ace, biromantic grey-aro, xenogender/monstergender – it/it/its

Vee is bisexual grey-ace and biromantic grey-aro, and it feels sexual and romantic attraction very rarely. Vee's gender, xenogender and monstergender, are linked to its identity as otherkin. Otherkin individuals consider themselves at least partially non-human. Vee describes its kintype as such:

My kintype is some variant of reptilian creature. I sometimes describe it as a dragon, sometimes as a dinosaur and sometimes as a lizard or reptile. I've experienced feelings of being non-human, with a particular draw to reptilian body shapes, since early childhood.

Vee's identity as reptilian is inherently linked to its experience of gender, in that Vee feels 'reptilian' or 'reptile-person' is the description that best matches its gender identity. People who are xenogender feel that their gender is related to some object or animal not normally associated with gender. Monstergender refers to a feeling of inhumanity associated with one's gender.

Chapter 5: Results

Part I: "Making Our Own Boxes": Neo-identities on Tumblr

"I think that people like me – people that don't fit the standard hetero/homo/bi, male/female categories – have probably always existed. It's just that we never existed in an environment that told us explicitly that it was okay to exist as the people we are before now. So we'd pick a box, usually the most socially accepted or most expected box, and we'd play along, and maybe we'd tell someone close to us how badly that box fit, but probably not … But then new words start getting coined – pansexual, asexual, romantic orientations, nonbinary – and we started getting the message that there's a lot more variation than we'd ever known. Suddenly we start realizing that if we don't fit neatly into one of those boxes, we don't have to try to cram ourselves into the closest one, or the one people expect us to fit in. We're allowed to make our own boxes, and even if we're the only ones that fit in those boxes, it's a damn sight better than what we had before."

Kay (26)

Traditional conceptions of attraction, gender, and identity are heavily reliant on rigid categories. According to these ideas, a person is straight, gay, or bisexual; they are male or they are female. Within the mainstream, there's little opportunity to openly deviate from these categories. Even where acceptance of non-straight and non-cis identities exists, that acceptance is often conditional on those identities not being too 'out there.' In an interview, Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore calls this the "violence of gay assimilation," which promotes a narrative of being LGBTQ+ that is least challenging to cisheteronormativity. Non-straight people are accepted by the mainstream if their existence is easily consumable by straight people, and if they can prove that gay people are 'the same' as straight people. Behind the "glamorous, sweatshop-produced rainbow flags, Tiffany wedding bands, [and] Grey Goose Cosmo-tinis" of the assimilationist agenda is a militant "policing of the borders" of gender and sexuality (Ruiz 241). In promoting a single, acceptable story of what it means to be LGBTQ+, assimilationist movements undercut the legitimacy of non-straight and non-cis people that don't fit the accepted narrative. Any 'acceptance' in these cases is conditional on the preservation of the status quo. Even when non-

cis and non-straight identities are considered acceptable, they are only considered acceptable within limits.

Acceptance is also not as widespread as it seems. The mainstream coverage of LGBTQ+ rights issues focuses on marriage equality, while problems like disproportionately high homelessness and suicide rates among non-cis and non-straight people are often ignored (Durso & Gates; Proctor & Groze). Despite the media attention given to trans spokespeople like Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, and Caitlyn Jenner in 2015, more trans people were murdered in 2015 than any other year on record (Michaels). An attack on a gay nightclub called Pulse in Orlando, Florida on June 12, 2016 resulted in the death of 49 people, making it one of the deadliest mass shootings in American history. Statistics suggest that violence against LGBTQ+ people is becoming more frequent and less likely to be reported (Prakash). Even as non-cis and non-straight people fight for equal rights, there is mostly only superficial acceptance, and violent pushback from people desperate to preserve cisheteronormativity.

Neo-identities are a reaction to restrictive dominant cultural ideas of attraction and gender. In a society that pressures people to identify within very strict confines, neo-identities are a way of redefining attraction and gender identity. By creating new words to describe their feelings, the people who use neo-identities are expanding the ongoing conversations about non-cis, non-straight experience. Neo-identities are not a purely political reaction, but also a personal one; they represent the frustration of people who are unable to find themselves in mainstream identity categories. Most of these new words have yet to reach or be accepted into the mainstream, and they exist and are circulated primarily on Tumblr.

The people I interviewed all use at least one neo-identity, falling primarily into the categories of romantic orientation and gender. Like many others, the people in these interviews

felt that their experiences couldn't be captured by the mainstream terminology offered to non-cis and non-straight people. Instead, they chose to define themselves in new ways, resisting mainstream definitions of attraction and gender.

Creating a More Nuanced Model of Attraction

Mainstream society conceptualizes attraction as something uncomplicated and natural. People 'fall in love at first sight' or have an 'instant connection' with someone they're interested in having a relationship with. The vast majority of popular films of all genres have, at the very least, a romantic subplot.[15] Popular narratives also normalize the idea that falling in love is a natural, inevitable milestone, which "brands [platonic relationships] as abnormal" (Gehringer). Most people also don't differentiate between the different types of attraction, except for occasional references to attraction that is 'purely physical' or only sexual. That type of attraction – physical or sexual with no romantic component – is considered fleeting and therefore a poor basis for a successful relationship. At worst, it's characterized as immoral. Hunter S. Thompson wrote in a letter: "Sex without love is as hollow and ridiculous as love without sex" (124). This attitude is pervasive and reinforced by popular culture, where movies and television regularly show promiscuous, self-destructive characters who are 'saved' when they settle down and fall in love or tortured by their inability to do so. The website TVTropes.org describes this as the "love redeems" trope, where love is depicted as being able to "drag the most committed, bloodthirsty, puppy-kicking villain kicking and screaming into being redeemed" ("Love Redeems"). Acceptable relationships are expected to include both sexual and romantic attraction. In asexual and aromantic communities, though, attraction is conceptualized as more complicated; and

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[15] A study of 100 popular American films, done by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, showed that 95 of those films had a romantic subplot. In 85 of the films, the romantic storyline was the "principle line of action" (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 16).

sexual and romantic attraction aren't considered the same or inherently linked. Neither is necessary for fulfilling a relationship.

While asexuality is gaining some momentum in mainstream media, aromanticism is still relatively unknown. When people are aware of aromantic identities, they're usually only familiar with what it means to be totally aromantic: experiencing no romantic attraction at all. In reality, there are a range of identities along the aromantic spectrum, and many people are coming up with new words to describe these varying experiences of attraction. For most of the people I interviewed, understanding their romantic orientation was a gradual process, in part because they'd grown up being told that sexual and romantic attraction are experienced similarly by everyone. Many people don't feel the need to differentiate between their sexual orientation and their romantic orientation, but for the people who do, understanding the difference between romantic attraction, sexual attraction, platonic attraction, and aesthetic attraction can sometimes be a struggle.

Identities like idemromantic[16] and nebularomantic[17] highlight the struggle many people have in differentiating between different types of attraction. Hyourin[18] discovered the word idemromantic after doing research on the aromantic spectrum, but before finding that word, they tried on other identities that just didn't seem to fit. "I identified as panromantic for quite a while and it just felt fake," Hyourin told me. "It didn't feel right and I couldn't figure out why. I'd never really separated platonic from romantic, I just hadn't realized it." Like Hyourin, Hatch[19] feels unable to differentiate between platonic and romantic attraction, but that inability stems

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[16] Feeling no difference between platonic and romantic attraction.

[17] Inability to differentiate between platonic and romantic attraction due to mental illness.

[18] Hyourin is asexual, idemromantic, recipromantic, and agender. Hyourin's pronouns are they/them/theirs.

[19] Hatch pansexual, nebularomantic, dependromantic, and borderfluid. Hatch's pronouns are go/gore/gores.

from mental illness. Hatch uses 'nebularomantic' to describe that difference. Mainstream society

makes little (if any) effort to demonstrate the difference between romantic and platonic

attraction, making it even more difficult for people on the ace and aro spectrum[20] to understand

their own feelings. Recognition of the different types of attraction and one's relationship to being

able to feel (or not feel) each type can make a substantial difference for people who are feeling

'left out' by society's definitions of attraction and desire.

Because of these incomplete societal definitions of attraction, many people 'try out'

different identities before finding the right word to describe themselves. Kay[21] described the

process of figuring out nir identity as "a struggle." After learning about asexuality, Kay started to

describe nemself as asexual and akoiromantic[22]. Before that, though, ne "tried and discarded

pretty much every mainstream sexuality before learning about the ace spectrum and asexuality

specifically." Kay described nir experiences of akoiromanticism:

> As for being akoiromantic, it's like this: To start with, romantic attraction is very rare for
> me, to the point where I always assumed the people around me were exaggerating how
> often they had crushes on people. I think I've had maybe four crushes in my life? And I'm
> honestly not sure about the first one, it's possible it was something I pretended so hard
> that I started believing it myself. Then, on those rare occasions when I do get a crush on
> someone, if there's any hint at all that the feeling is reciprocated, the attraction goes away.
> Not instantly, but inside a week or so.

Kay's experience of romantic attraction is different from mainstream narratives about romance.

Being able to sum up nir specific, personal experience of romantic attraction with a single word

– akoiromantic – is extremely convenient. The journey that led nem to finding the right label is

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[20] The asexual (ace) and aromantic (aro) spectrum refers to the various identities of total, partial, or conditional
asexuality or aromanticism. Also referred to as ace-spec and aro-spec.

[21] Kay is asexual, akoiromantic, and agender. Kay's pronouns are ne/nem/nirs.

[22] Romantic attraction disappears if the feelings are (or seem to be) reciprocated; and/or romantic attraction with no
desire for the feelings to be reciprocated.

important, because the word 'akoiromantic' makes it easier for Kay to communicate nir feelings and needs to the people around nem.

Unfortunately, resources about neo-identities aren't often readily available, which is why many people who identify in non-traditional ways start off using more well-known identity words. As they discover neo-identities that come close to matching their feelings, they 'try on' those words, too. Sometimes the words fit; sometimes they don't. There is a strong stigma against this kind of identity exploration. Many mainstream LGBTQ+ movements promote the narrative of having 'always known' they weren't cis or straight. In "I Didn't Always Know I Was Gay," Carmen Rios writes about falling in love with a woman at 20 after growing up thinking she was straight. She struggles to recognize her own gay identity in part because of the unwavering testimonies of her gay friends: "I have heard countless coming out stories. Every single time they begin the same way: *I've always known*." Many non-cis and non-straight people can describe moments in their childhood that support their now open non-cis/non-straight identity, and these stories are valuable and important to tell. To suggest they hold true for everyone, though, is inaccurate and damaging. As Freiya Benson writes on trans identity narratives, prioritizing the 'always known' narrative as the only narrative "creates a hierarchy of validity, which is incredibly destructive, and hurtful to many, many trans people." Not only is it harmful because it invalidates people's experiences, but it can discourage people from undergoing the process of figuring out their identity. Shaming identity exploration encourages people to settle for labels that may not accurately describe them. Trying out and discarding inaccurate labels isn't a symptom of 'faking,' and it isn't an indication that neo-identities are only a fad that people will inevitably grow out of; it's an essential step in identity formation for many, many people.

Because mainstream society more or less equates all different forms of attraction, the process of identity exploration can be very valuable in learning to understand one's own relationship to attraction and desire. Finding the right word can be a long and arduous process. Neo-identities act as an essential resource for aro and ace spectrum people who want to better understand and communicate their own experiences of attraction. Being able to articulate their experiences, to themselves and to others, makes it easier to make sure their needs are met and respected by the people around them.

Gender Beyond Male and Female

While mainstream narratives of desire exclude aromanticism and asexuality, popular conceptions of gender promote the idea that all people fall into two distinct categories: male and female. Even as trans people begin to become more visible in the media, cissexism is preserved through our language. Phrases like 'biological sex' and 'opposite gender' perpetuate the idea that there are only two real, true genders, and those genders are linked to physical sex characteristics like genitalia. Slowly, more people are starting to accept the possibility of existing 'in between' maleness and femaleness, with celebrities like Ruby Rose and Tilda Swinton identifying themselves as existing somewhere in the middle or as both male and female (Molloy; von Kreutzbruck). But even the categories 'boy, girl, or in-between' don't account for the vastly different ways people experience gender. Neo-identities that refer to gender challenge cissexist assumptions that gender can be easily encapsulated or explained by rigid biological or psychological categories. New gender words often explain the ways that gender can be a very personal experience, and that feelings of being gendered vary widely.

In some cases, neo-identities point to the fact that gender does not have to be 'one or the other.' Andy[23], who is a demigirl, describes herself as mostly a woman, "but part of [her] feels as though [she] could be genderfluid[24] or agender[25]." In this case, Andy's gender identity can't be wholly described as female, but instead *includes* femaleness, as well as including other experiences of gender. Demigenders challenge the idea that all gender can be described with the categories of male and female, instead suggesting that many people have the potential to be multiple genders, at the same time or at different times, and that those multiple gender identities can exist in fluctuating proportions. Neo-identities also account for times where gender, or the feeling of being gendered/inhabiting a gender, is not a factor in a person's identity. Illya[26] is neutrois[27] and spent some time figuring out their relationship to gender:

> … I know that I was thinking for a while one night that I did not feel like a girl. Thinking of myself as being a girl felt unnatural and wrong, and like something other than myself. My obvious next thought was that I am a boy, but thinking of myself as a boy felt just as wrong. The conclusion, to me, was that I must be neither male nor female.

Illya found the word 'neutrois' by accident, on a (now defunct) website made in the late 1990s by the creator of the word. The creator's experience and description of the term, "as 'non-gendered class' (a smushing-together of 'neutral' or 'neuter' and '-ois' as in words such as 'bourgeois')," resonated with Illya's experience and they "latched onto the term" (Illya). The term fit with Illya's own understanding of their gender as being neither male nor female.

In addition to complicating the categories of maleness and femaleness, some neo-identities present new categories of gender altogether. These identities suggest that gender can be

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[23] Andy is pansexual, panromantic, and a demigirl. Andy's pronouns are she/her/hers.

[24] A gender that varies or changes over time.

[25] The absence of gender; genderlessness.

[26] Illya is pansexual/bisexual, asexual, and neutrois. Illya's pronouns are they/them/theirs.

[27] Neutral or null gender.

influenced by aspects of the self that are not commonly associated with gender. Neo-identities like this fundamentally challenge mainstream definitions of gender. They enable us to recognize gender as an intensely personal experience of the self and, as such, sometimes denote the ways that personality (or other factors) might influence gender. For Hatch, pronouns are about a larger concept of gender that incorporates aspects of gore personality. Hatch uses go/gore/goreself pronouns, because: "I like gore and horror and I feel thats important enough to have as a part of who I am." Things that Hatch likes, rather than being messily assigned an inherent 'maleness' or 'femaleness,' become important enough to gore that they constitute an entirely new, entirely personal category of gender. Hatch also identifies as borderfluid, which is a gender identity specifically for people with borderline personality disorder (BPD). Because of BPD, Hatch has "a bad sense of identity and I kinda grasp at anything I can to specify who I am." Being borderfluid means that Hatch uses over ten different gender identities to describe goreself. Again, Hatch's identity label and pronouns are intimately linked to parts of gore identity that aren't traditionally related to gender. Personality and neurodivergence[28] become an integral part of Hatch's gender identity, not in a limiting way (such as when someone who likes dolls is compulsorily labelled feminine), but in an intensely personal way.

Vee[29], whose gender identity is inherently linked to its identity as otherkin[30], describes the mingling of gender and other aspects of the self like this:

> I don't just feel an absence of gender, but a strong feeling that the thing that should identify me in the world, the label that should be placed on me and the social category into which I should fit, is not male or female, not man or woman, but reptile person. In

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[28] According to a 2015 Tumblr post, 'neurodivergent' was coined by Tumblr user sherlocksflataffect, as a response to the use of 'neurodiverse' and 'neurodiversity.' In a clarifying post about the term, sherlocksflataffect wrote, "Neurodivergent refers to neurologically divergent from typical" or "a brain that diverges." This includes autism, mental illness, developmental disabilities, epilepsy, etc.

[29] Vee is bisexual gray-ace, biromantic grey-aro, xenogender, and monstergender. Vee's pronouns are it/it/its.

[30] Otherkin feel that they are, at least partially, non-human. Otherkin often identify with non-human animals and objects, though the experience of inhumanity varies.

the way that other people seem to feel male or femaleness is important to their self-image, reptilianness is important to me.

For some people like Vee, understanding gender involves creating an entirely new category. Gender is understood here as a part of identity that can be experienced differently for different people, in that it isn't restricted to normative categories. We don't normally think of other aspects of the self as having to conform to strict binaries or distinct types. People don't normally consider there to be only two personality types, for instance; personality is recognized as being diverse and variable across all people. Like all aspects of the self, gender can't be defined in a succinct, uncomplicated way, and there doesn't seem to be any reason that understandings of gender can't be informed by traits associated with personality or other parts of ourselves. If anything, looking at gender identity in a new light can help us uncover limiting or oppressive understandings of gender. At the same time, it's equally valid if a person feels their gender is totally unrelated to their personality, if they have no investment in defining their gender, or if they feel they don't have a gender. Neo-identities are not necessarily more profound, enlightened, or progressive than established gender identities, but the *existence* of neo-identities as a whole makes persistent cultural norms about gender easier to challenge and unpack.

Challenging Damaging Cultural Norms

The narratives of 'normal' experiences of attraction and gender aren't only damaging because they *ignore* the real experiences of real people – people who don't fit within the categories of gay/straight/bi and male/female – but because they actively harm and otherize those people. When the only possibilities presented to someone don't fit with their experience, they begin to internalize damaging messages about their own identity and validity. If someone doesn't fit with what is considered 'normal,' then the alternative assumption is that they must be *abnormal.* It's an easy leap from 'abnormal' to 'wrong' and 'broken.' Neo-identities offer

reassurance to people who have grown up thinking they are abnormal, wrong, and broken because they don't fit into societal understandings of attraction and gender.

Again and again, the people I interviewed described how finding their identity words brought them relief and reassurance. When people discover their experiences don't fit into the culturally accepted categories of attraction or gender, they feel out of place. Roe[31] described it as being "in purgatory" or "neither here nor there." For Niamh[32], the feeling of using the wrong label was like wearing "trousers that are just an inch too short." These are feelings that non-straight and non-cis people have always experienced, and they aren't unique to people using neo-identities. Cisheteronormativity is damaging to everyone. Even with some non-cis and non-straight identities becoming better recognized by the mainstream, non-cis and non-straight people of all identities ('new' or not) are taught implicitly to believe that they don't belong.

Comfort comes from seeing one's identity validated. For people uncomfortable with mainstream identity language, this means finally finding the language that confirms their experience as real and acceptable. Finding a fitting label "feels like something has slotted into place" or like "a sigh of relief" (Roe). Hyourin gave a similar description: "When I found a word that fit, a label that made sense, it was satisfying and... comfortable. Like finally cuddling up in a blanket after being outside in the cold." There is a sense of real, physical relief that accompanies finding the right label, like a weight off of the shoulders.

The relief is also about realizing that 'different' does not mean 'wrong.' For Hyourin, recognizing their asexuality meant: "I wasn't broken, I wasn't flawed or undesirable. I was just different. And that was okay." When someone finds the right word to describe their experiences,

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[31] Roe is pansexual, grey-aro panromantic, and genderqueer. Roe's pronouns are they/them/theirs.
[32] Niamh is pansexual, demi-heteroromantic/grey-aro, and not-cis. Niamh's pronouns are she/her/hers.

they are also more likely to discover the existence of a community of other people that share

their feelings. "I think with any label the first feeling is relief," Roe wrote. "'Oh this exists. I'm

not broken. other people feel this way too.'" The existence of language that describes you

confirms that you aren't alone; that you aren't the only one to feel the way you feel. In a post

about discovering their asexuality, Tumblr user anagnori describes these feelings in detail:

> … I did not have the words to describe my experiences, so I could not articulate my
> identity, even to myself. And trying to reject social norms when you have no clear
> identity of your own is like trying to hold back the sea with a sandcastle … When I called
> myself "asexual," my past became meaningful. The blank spaces themselves became
> important. I observed patterns and preferences in myself that I could not see before. From
> an "undecided" perspective, my teenage years were a wasted opportunity, a social failure.
> From an "asexual" perspective, I could see that I hadn't wasted anything - I was being
> true to myself all along, and my life had been better for it.

When people have the language to describe their experiences, they are reassured that those

experiences aren't deviant or invalid. The first step in articulating your identity to others is

articulating it to yourself. Having the right word to describe your experience "[makes] it easier to

think about" (Illya), and easier to understand.

Challenging cultural norms without meaningful, accurate language really is, as anagnori

writes, "like trying to hold back the sea with a sandcastle." Once people have the language to

describe how they feel, though, they can more confidently define themselves outside of the

confines of cisheteronormativity. More than just being tools for a radical re-organization of

cultural norms and assumptions, though, neo-identities are a life-saving resource for real people

in their everyday lives. They are reassuring and life-affirming. Neo-identities remind people that

they are not 'wrong' or 'broken' simply because they're different. Instead, these new identity

words can reveal the wrongness or brokenness of dominant cultural ideas that lead to the

oppression of non-normative attraction and gender identities.

Part II: The Rise of Neo-identities

"… over the past 2-3 years there's been a huge boom in various minority identities and labels. i personally think that the reason for this is the same why a lot of people think that 'there are too many gay people these days, everyone is gay now, suddenly gay is all over'. it's just that slowly the acceptance for being queer has increased and people are more comfortable with exploring their own identities as well as with the identities of other people … according to me it's a two-fold change, the awareness is spreading and on the other hand a platform is being provided where people are coming together to talk about identities and stuff."

Roe (19)

The coinage of neo-identities is by no means a new phenomenon, but conversations about new identity words for non-cis and non-straight people are becoming more visible than ever before. More people are adopting neo-identities, and more people are coining them. Even mainstream news outlets have started to pick up on the increasing popularity of neo-identities. In a Huffington Post article called, "What's a Skoliosexual?", Noah Michelson references Miley Cyrus's recent self-identification as pansexual and writes that "pansexual is just one of many sexual and romantic identities that exist beyond more commonly known and discussed orientations like heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual." The article goes on to define a handful of little-known identity words: asexual, aromantic, greysexual, demisexual, and so on.

While people have always found new ways to describe their identity by creating new words or reclaiming them, developments in LGBTQ+ activism and technological advancement have led to the increased popularity of neo-identities. Increased acceptance, more public conversations about sexuality and gender, and the cultivation of community spaces on the internet (Tumblr, in particular) have all made exploring identity much easier. Given the resources and ability to explore their identity, more people are realizing that they don't fit into the restrictive categories promoted by mainstream ideas of gender, sexuality, and attraction.

Acceptance and Visibility

As Roe pointed out during our interview, it's not uncommon for people to assume that "everyone is gay now" because of the increased visibility of non-cis and non-straight people. Huffington Post writer Quincy LeNear Gossfield writes a satirical response to this misconception titled, "Is Everybody Gay Now? (It's So In)," in which he sarcastically decides to renounce his gay identity because it's become 'too trendy.' Gossfield is, of course, mocking the idea that being non-straight or non-cis could possibly be a trend, but the assumption is common. This idea is directed primarily at women, with jokes about 'LUGs' (Lesbians Until Graduation) and 'hasbians' – both dismissive nicknames for women who supposedly go through a performative 'phase' of same-sex desire and then 'return' to being straight. As mentioned in Chapter 3, a more recent derogatory term has popped up to target trans people: 'transtrender.' Urban Dictionary provides multiple definitions for the word, but the general idea is as follows: "A transtrender is a person (usually between the ages of 9 and 18) who calls themselves a transgender person because they think it makes them cool or special" ("Transtrender (4)"). It's a word specifically used to ridicule and undermine the identities of trans people, and it's often hurled at people who use neo-identities because they are less well-known than other identity words. Regardless of the exact identity, though, there is a tendency for people to question the validity and longevity of non-cis and non-straight identities. It's true that there seem to be more people identifying as non-cis and non-straight, but 'trendiness' is not an adequate explanation for this apparent change.

"Trendiness" arguments are based not only on bigoted beliefs about non-cis and non-straight people, but also on a fundamental misunderstanding of the numbers. In general, there's already considerable disagreement about what percentage of the population can be reliably classified as non-cis and/or non-straight. Popular opinion holds that 1 in 10 people are gay, but measuring how many people are LGBTQ+ is extremely difficult and has led to a wide variety of

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figures. The 1 in 10 statistic originates from Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male,* which stated that 10% of men are homosexual. This number has been generalized to the rest of the population and is regularly repeated, but also often challenged. Some recent criticisms of Kinsey's figure have cited national surveys in the United States and the UK that suggest the number is more likely much lower: somewhere between 1-3% (Chalabi; Somashekhar). It's important to challenge these statistics because, in quoting them, mainstream culture relegates marginalized identities to a permanent minority status. In addition, survey design issues further complicate the statistics. First, the surveys usually only include the categories straight, gay, lesbian, and bisexual. These particular surveys make little reference to non-cisgender people, and they generally don't provide other sexuality options. Second, and more importantly, research suggests that people are not likely to provide truthful answers to questions about sexuality. Using a new method of data collection that controls more effectively for social desirability bias than previous methods, one study found that, when respondents were better assured of their anonymity, self-reports of non-heterosexual identity increased by 65% (Coffman, Coffman & Ericson). It's hard to say exactly how many people are non-cis and non-straight. That said, it's likely to be a higher number than most conventional surveys indicate.

One thing that is clear, though, is that more young people than ever before are starting to openly identify themselves as non-cis and non-straight. A survey of Americans aged 13-20 determined that only 48% of them considered themselves completely heterosexual, and "[f]ifty-six percent of 13-to-20-year-olds said that they knew someone who went by gender neutral pronouns" (Tsjeng). Reports like these, as well as observations about the users on LGBTQ+-friendly websites like Tumblr, prompt accusations like "everybody seems to be gay now." Rather than being a trend, though, this increase in numbers reflects changes in society. As non-cis and

non-straight people begin to get more media representation and the fight for equal rights progresses, people feel safer openly identifying as something other than straight and cisgender. Not only that, but people begin to feel safer and better able to examine and explore their identity, which leads to more people realizing they're not cis and/or straight.

Without educational resources about non-cis and non-straight identities and experience, many people can live their lives feeling a persistent, nameless discomfort with themselves. As seen in the last section, this often manifests as the perception of oneself as 'broken' or 'wrong'. People may draw strength and inspiration from non-cis and non-straight characters in popular media; GLAAD's "Where We Are On TV Report" for 2015 demonstrates that LGBT media representation is (slowly but surely) increasing. When the mainstream begins to show greater recognition of uncommon non-cis and non-straight identities, this too makes it easier for people to better understand their identity. As of 2016, Merriam-Webster officially added the word "genderqueer" to its unabridged dictionary (Lopez). People are seeing and hearing more about non-cis and non-straight identities, and that leads to more people realizing they might not be cis or straight.

While there's still an incredibly long way to go to combat all the difficulties facing non-cis and non-straight people, the relative acceptance and visibility afforded to them today makes it easier for more people to start identifying in non-traditional ways. This also means that people feel more comfortable coining new words to describe themselves. Seeing neo-identities gain traction encourages other people to create neo-identities if they feel they need to. As Kay puts it, people realize that they're "allowed to make [their] own boxes."

Out of the Closet and Onto the Web

Another important factor in the current popularity of neo-identities is the internet. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, there are many debates about how the internet may or may not act as a utopian space for non-cis and non-straight people. Whether or not 'utopian' is the right descriptor, it's undeniable that going online offers access to two very important things: educational resources and a diverse community.

The internet makes educational resources more readily available, and people can easily access information about non-cis and non-straight identities with a simple Google search. This is safer than going to a library or another physical space with similar resources. The risks of being outed are slimmer (a person might be recognized while checking out a library book or visiting a university's sexual diversity office, but the internet offers relative anonymity). For many of the people I interviewed, getting online was a big part of starting to learn about non-cis and non-straight identity. Roe started using the internet to explore their sexuality and identity: "my forays into sexuality started with erotica and porn mostly before i turned to informative formats like blogs/vlogs/videos through podcasts and youtube." Learning about new identity words on tumblr sent Roe into "a research spiral." The internet was essential to Vee's identity exploration, too: "I got online when I was 15, in 1999, and before that I'd never even heard of a transgender person. I knew that gay and lesbian were identities that existed but not much more than that." Even with non-cis and non-straight people now popping up more often in television, movies, and literature, some people have less access to media with diverse representations. Many young people are limited by their living situation, which means they can't easily watch or read LGBTQ+-friendly media openly. On the internet, it's easier to access these resources without others knowing.

In addition to providing educational resources like articles and wikis, online communities offer even more valuable types of information by providing an opportunity for non-cis and non-

straight people to connect with others like themselves, giving them access to personalized advice and resources. Online communities allow like-minded people to connect despite geographical restrictions. In Susan Driver's research on birl[33] communities, she finds that "the community provides a collective place to dialogue publicly about identity, to share with others alternative ways of inhabiting in-between genders" (188). Non-cis and non-straight internet users find spaces where they can ask questions about identity and receive knowledgeable answers from other members of the community (e.g. "Is the way I feel normal?", "Is there a word for how I feel?"). These communities also help simply by making people feel less alone. For people living in places with little to no non-cis/non-straight community, or living in places where they can't safely be open about their identity, the internet becomes a life-saving resource.

The more people who find these resources, the more varied the conversations that emerge, and so discussions of identity expand online. Increasingly specific resources and communities become available, like the birl community in Driver's research, or the increasingly popular Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN). Again, people are better able to explore and question their gender, sexuality and romantic orientations, which leads to the increase in neo-identities we're currently seeing. People are better able to take part in and contribute to these conversations, coining words or at least becoming involved in the process of defining them. While many different aspects of the internet make these conversations possible, Tumblr in particular is a platform that facilitates identity exploration and discussion.

Why Tumblr?

Because so many neo-identities seem to be emerging on Tumblr, I'm interested in understanding what makes Tumblr attractive to non-cis and non-straight people who want to

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[33] 'Birl' refers to a variety of identities that fall in between the categories of 'boy' and 'girl.'

have conversations about identity. Tumblr is built in a way that makes identity exploration easier in some contexts, and it's very different from the other available social media platforms that are popular right now.

Many people that I interviewed felt that Tumblr was a particularly useful platform for non-cis and non-straight people. Most of them called themselves 'active' users of Tumblr, checking in at least once a day. The type of activity varied: some of them mostly reblogged and liked existing content, while a few were more likely to make original posts. For everyone, Tumblr was a useful and entertaining space, and for some, it was an important outlet and an environment where they could more easily 'be themselves.' In an article called "A beautiful design and no jerks: how Tumblr did it," Jeff Roberts writes that Tumblr "has grown to tens of millions of users but still retain[s] an intimate, community feel" because it encourages "a more thoughtful form of community engagement." Roberts attributes Tumblr's communal atmosphere to the reblog system, which makes replying to and commenting on content less anonymous. In reality, though, Tumblr's strength is not in that it doesn't allow for anonymity, but that it allows for the right *kind* of anonymity: just enough that users feel free to be more open about their identity than they are on other social media.

Because Tumblr doesn't require you to link your blog to your 'offline identity' the way a website like Facebook does, people have the opportunity to be anonymous on Tumblr in the sense that their blog will probably never be meaningfully connected to their legal name. This doesn't mean that people on Tumblr use that anonymity as an opportunity to create a fake persona; instead, many of them use it to be more open about aspects of their identity that might receive backlash in their offline life. By now, most Western families are highly connected on Facebook. As Adam Rifkin writes for TechCrunch, "As long as Mom sees you on Facebook

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occasionally, she isn't going to think to look for you on another site." Most people don't have relatives following them on Tumblr. The people I interviewed confirmed that part of Tumblr's appeal was the sense of anonymity and privacy it promotes. "I go to facebook to stay in touch with friends in real life," Roe told me. "i go to tumblr to escape from real life." Facebook was seen as a space for keeping in touch with 'real life' friends, while Tumblr was a website where users felt like they could express themselves more authentically without facing repercussions offline. According to Devin[34]: "[Tumblr is] the only place that I can be unapologetically me because only 2 people that follow me know me in real life." The anonymity also made it easier not just to express non-normative identities, but also to explore them, thanks to Tumblr's 'anonymous ask' option: "you can ask questions about your sexuality and gender identity without having to be embarrassed" (Devin).

Tumblr is also attractive to non-cis and non-straight people because of its community, which is large and varied. For Hyourin, Tumblr was a particularly good platform for finding community "because everyone comes to tumblr to be around things they love." While other websites might have more homogenous communities or specific themes, "Tumblr is about blogging. It has no character limit, and is designed around shouting out to the void and seeing if some people shout back" (Hyourin). People can also shape their own experience of the website by only following the types of people they're interested in hearing from, which allows smaller communities to emerge within the website. In addition to being a large and diverse community, Tumblr also has many non-cis and non-straight users, and many people on Tumblr are interested in social justice. Discussions about identity and language naturally develop out of a community with such similar interests. As such, many of the people I interviewed found their identity words

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[34] Devin is queer and genderfluid. Devin uses both he/him/his and she/her/hers pronouns.

through Tumblr. "When I first joined the website I learned how open a community it was and that there were a lot more gender and sexuality identities than I could've imagined at first," Andy wrote. For Kay, seeing someone ne followed on Tumblr come out as demisexual was what helped nem start to understand nir own identity: "I hadn't ever heard a word that came that close to describing me before." Tumblr provides access to information and community, as well as providing enough anonymity that people feel comfortable using that information and taking part in the community.

Tumblr is very useful for identity exploration, and useful for promoting conversations about neo-identities in particular. The platform allows for the rapid spread of information due to the reblog system (most posts on Tumblr are reblogs rather than original posts), which means that new ideas for neo-identities and debates around definitions can happen quickly and visibly. Informational blogs on Tumblr catalogue the various new identity words, and moderators of those blogs work to stay up-to-date on the evolving definitions of those words. These blogs also devote themselves to helping people understand and name their identity when they're uncertain of how to label themselves; the safety provided by the anonymous ask system makes it easier for questioning individuals to ask for advice. People can anonymously ask questions, describing their experience of gender or attraction, and then blog moderators will do their best to provide possible identity word options that describe those experiences. Finding these kinds of resources on Tumblr isn't difficult. Most people involved in the non-cis, non-straight communities on Tumblr will come into contact with people who use neo-identities, through the people they follow and the reblogs they see. Tumblr users often display their identity words right on their blog for everyone to see. People come into contact with these unfamiliar words and then investigate them further (going into what Roe called in our interview "a research spiral"). The

community and modes of communication present on Tumblr make it ideal for counterpublic communication, as pointed out by Bryce J. Renninger. Non-cis and non-straight people can come together to talk about self-naming, seek advice from others like them, and explore their own identity. As Nancy Fraser writes of counterpublics: "On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (68). Tumblr is a safe space, where neo-identity users find relief (an escape from the 'real world'), but also a "training ground," where neo-identity users learn strategies for navigating and challenging cisheternormative society.

The way Tumblr allows users to express their identity also affects how neo-identities are communicated on the platform. While Tumblr doesn't require users to share personal information, many people do so on their main blog page or on a separate 'about' page. On social networking sites like Tumblr, users have access to a certain amount of visibility and image control that they might not otherwise have in their day-to-day lives. Visibility is important because "people craft their identities through interaction, in concert with others and out of the diverse contextual resources within their reach" (Tiidenberg 177). This relates in part to the ability to talk to other people in one's community, as mentioned previously, but the simple act of *being seen* is also important to identity development. 'Being seen' as the identity one claims is validating and reassuring; on Tumblr, users can influence the way they are seen. While it may be difficult to explicitly signify genderfluid identity in an offline context without being misinterpreted, Tumblr users can label their blog as the blog of a genderfluid person and make that aspect of their identity explicit. They can, to some extent, influence the way they're perceived by others. Hilary Thurston suggests that Tumblr gives users the ability to "control the gaze," because "control is achieved by posting items on a blog whose theme is queer identity,

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style or politics to ensure a queer reading of the posted content" (5). When someone posts a

selfie on a blog that explicitly identifies them as a bigender person, for instance, they "ensure a

queer reading" of their image; this is also achieved through the addition of specific tags, like

#bigender. This is a flawed and incomplete form of control, because images and posts can be

removed from their context and reposted somewhere else, but Tumblr does give users the ability

to make their identity explicit while providing relative safety, thanks to anonymity.

Some of the aspects of Tumblr that make it so ideal for conversations about neo-identities

also work against it. One of the most unique aspects of Tumblr is the way information circulates

due to the reblog system. Because reblogging is the main way information moves around on

Tumblr, ideas spread rapidly. As Vee pointed out, this is both good and bad:

> Tumblr evolves extremes more quickly due to the reblog system. Ideas spread incredibly
> quickly, and anger about those ideas spreads in response. Conflicts that would have taken
> years to arise and be resolved on slower-moving platforms spring up and are over in
> weeks on Tumblr. That can be good, because change happens faster and conflicts don't
> drag on, but every time there *is* a conflict, it leaves a lot of scars.

The fast-paced nature of Tumblr is a double-edged sword. "Obviously it's a place where a lot of

young people are politically active and aware, and that's allowed a lot of change to happen in a

short time," Vee pointed out to me. "The platform also allows ideas to be spread very rapidly.

Those are wonderful things."

The rapid spread of ideas not only leads to conflicts that 'leave scars,' but also makes it

more likely that arguments will be taken out of context. When information circulates so quickly,

it's easy for users to miss the original context of the conflict. Tumblr posts focus little on the

original poster (OP); people reblog posts written by other people in order to express things about

themselves. If someone is browsing Tumblr and a person they follow reblogs a post about

LGBTQ+ activism, that post reflects *more* about the person that reblogged it and their position

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on LGBTQ+ activism than it does about the OP (a person they probably don't know). There are exceptions to this rule, of course, but this is often how information is spread. Because reblogs are read more as a reflection of the reblogger rather than the OP posts that are personal or are in reference to a specific or personal event are taken out of context. The lack of context can lead to arguments, because comments lose their personal nature and can more easily be misconstrued as *wholly* political. When this isn't the intention of the OP, or when the OP doesn't expect to be pulled into a debate, arguments can get unpleasant very fast.

The ability to customize the content on Tumblr is also both good and bad. On the one hand, it creates an environment where users see content that makes them feel comfortable, safe, and welcomed. On the other hand, only following people with similar interests or ideals can often create a kind of echo chamber. Again, this relates back to posts becoming removed from their contexts: often people will reblog posts that seem true, because several people they know have reblogged and endorsed those posts, but many of the people reblogging may not actually know the original context of the post. Usually, these posts take the form of 'call outs' which claim another user is problematic for something they've said or done. While it's important to hold people accountable for their actions, call out posts like this are often circulated by people who don't know very much about of the incident or conflict. Conflicts become harder to resolve when people participate in them without knowing the context. These conversations, both productive and unproductive ones, are in part able to happen because Tumblr is relatively unmoderated. People are free to post what they want without much interference from Tumblr staff. As Kay points out:

> There is room for great things and horrid things to grow. In general, though, the fact that it is unmoderated and there's the potential to clash with others has really allowed me to solidify my understanding of the world in general, and identity in particular, which is something that more moderated spaces don't accomplish very well.

So, the lack of moderation on Tumblr can be very helpful to conversations about identity, but can also increase the amount of conflicts that arise. The lack of moderation and openness of the platform also allows outsiders to enter the communities within Tumblr, which they can then ridicule or criticize.

Finally, Tumblr's very nature as a social media platform can work against itself, simply because, as Vee points out:

> One of the aims of social media, being that it's social, is to gain popularity. And so while there's a lot of challenging of norms, there's also a bubble where the only norms being challenged are the ones that people think their peers will approve of them challenging. That's a problem for people whose identities are truly unusual, or might bring into question cherished aspects of popular theories.

Even in a community where social justice is so important, people are still wary of bringing up unpopular opinions because they don't want to face backlash. Like Vee says, this leads to some new ideas being promoted while others are ignored or ridiculed. Important conversations about neo-identities can and do happen on Tumblr, but they don't happen without conflict and criticism. In general, many aspects of Tumblr make it more conducive to conversations about non-normative identities than other platforms, but the website isn't perfect. Neither are the communities it houses.

While my paper focuses on Tumblr as a site of neo-identity creation and expression, Tumblr is by no means the only place these conversations are happening online. Discussions about new identity words were happening online before Tumblr was created, and they continue to happen in other online communities. Illya pointed out that they were involved in several online communities that engaged in discussions about alternate sexual orientations and gender identities, before Tumblr became popular:

… there was a decent amount of discussion going on forums, for example, like whatisgender.net (sadly, now defunct), and places like livejournal and deviantart, about alternative identities. Tumblr really skews female and female-assigned-at-birth, but within nerd male(-predominant) communities (eg, computer scientists, engineers...), alternate identities are ALSO overrepresented. I know this both from personal observation and from several informal surveys that have been taken of various subcommunities of them. These IDs tend to be kind of different from the ones developed on tumblr, for example, less of a focus on political implications and activism, more heavy focus on accuracy of description of personal experience, investigation of what the origin/implications of all this is, either biologically or socially, etc.

While fewer and fewer people are using websites like Livejournal and DeviantArt anymore, other online communities still engage in discussions about neo-identities. The conversations on Tumblr are more visible than conversations on other online platforms, and Tumblr neo-identity communities seem to get more media attention from online news and entertainment websites; but Tumblr isn't solely responsible for the increased popularity of neo-identities. Hopefully, future research can explore some of the ways less visible online communities are contributing to these discussions.

Part III: The Utility of Labels and Neo-identities

"… it's like why can't we just all be people? Why must you label someone? We are all humans who want to be happy, why does any of this matter? But then I disagree because people find who they are through labels. People have an identity through labels. We are able to find others like us through labels and that is comforting, knowing that someone else is experiencing what you are and they may have advice/tips for you and you don't feel like such an outcast because within these labels you have become a part of a community, ya know? I mean, if labels had never been created, I would agree that we don't need them, but we have them, and some good has come out of labels."

<div align="right">Devin (23)</div>

One of the questions that came up with many of the people I interviewed was how they felt about common critiques of labels. When they question the utility of labels, people usually default to clichés: "We're all human." "Labels are for soup cans." "Love has no label." For the most part, these types of criticisms miss the mark by not understanding the importance that labels have for many individuals. Of course, the people I interviewed understood the importance of labels and neo-identities because of their personal experience with them; but they also commented on the limitations of labels. There are times when labels simply aren't useful, or when neo-identities don't fit the needs of people identifying outside of normative identity categories. Ignoring the limitations of labels and neo-identities in order to romanticize them does no one any favours. Rather, recognizing these limitations and problems can create a more nuanced understanding of identity and how it relates to language. Neo-identities provide comfort to many people, but not everyone wants to use them, either for personal reasons, convenience, or safety. Neo-identities also push us to acknowledge damaging cultural narratives about desire and gender, but they are by no means an escape from other problems inherent in language: namely, that linguistic expressions will never be perfectly reflective of experience or totally inclusive.

Labels Aren't For Everyone

Finding an identity word to describe a very specific, personal experience of gender or attraction can be very freeing, but it's not an important part of identity exploration or expression for everyone. While some people might gain self-acceptance and self-understanding from claiming a neo-identity, others simply don't feel the need. In an article for Bitch Magazine, Joshunda Sanders writes that "while the Q of 'queer' is rightfully gaining more traction, the Q of 'questioning' doesn't get a lot of love in a culture that demands definition." The desire, as a non-straight or non-cis person, to remain unnamed is often seen as a "political cop-out," because naming oneself in a non-normative way is so often a very conspicuous and political act. Sanders calls attention to the divided nature of conversations about identity labels: labels are often seen as entirely good or entirely bad. Everyone should label themselves, or no one should. The political ramifications of naming oneself as non-cis and non-straight are important, but so is the matter of personal choice. *Not* naming oneself can be as transgressive an act as naming oneself; it can also simply be another strategy for survival, another way of understanding the self. Both strategies are important to examine as political and personal choices.

There are plenty of reasons for rejecting labels. Some people don't find a label they want to use. While people who use neo-identities often recount the freeing experience of finding a word that can describe them, it isn't always a matter of finding the labels or pronouns that 'fit you just right.' Niamh explained that, while she identifies as non-cis, she hasn't found a word that feels like it perfectly describes her experience. She continues to use she/her pronouns for convenience: "I dont get a better feeling when hearing myself referred to as 'they' for example. I guess pronouns just arent that important to me." Not everyone has a story about finding the perfect label, and for many people, not having a label is okay. Niamh went on: "I used to be more worried about having a label to describe my gender but now Im comfortable not defining it.

Gender is such an abstract concept to me that trying to label and define it for me in my life seems absurd." For Niamh, it's easier to leave her gender as primarily undefined, because it's not something she feels can be summed up easily with language or labels.

Labels can also be restrictive. "It can be daunting to the questioning or unsure folk who might not really satisfy all the conditions on the metaphorical checklist," Roe said, after pointing out that sometimes labels can "box you in." Not everyone benefits from labels in the same way or at all. For some people, finding an appropriate label is freeing, while for others, labels are constricting. What becomes important, instead of deciding whether all people should or shouldn't use labels, is for all people to have the *option* to use labels. Neo-identities help expand those options, but people shouldn't be forced to use labels they don't want, even if their experience falls into the definition of a particular label or neo-identity.

Coercive labelling becomes a problem when labels are considered the only way to understand the identities of others. While the word 'queer' has important personal and political meaning for many non-cis and non-straight people, applying it to the entire community harms those who don't want to reclaim the word because they associate 'queer' with its use as a slur. Labelling anyone against their consent can be disrespectful and often condescending, because it suggests the person being labelled doesn't 'know themselves' and needs to be told who they are. There is disagreement within the non-cis and non-straight community about when certain words should be used to describe people without their consent. Words like allosexual[35] and monosexual[36] raise some of the concerns associated with coercive labelling. While many asexual people point to the fact that words like 'allosexual' help them describe their experience and

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[35] A word for people who aren't on the ace spectrum.
[36] A word for people who aren't multiple gender attracted (MGA).

struggles, others (especially same-gender attracted, or SGA[37], people) feel that being labelled 'allosexual' without their consent is harmful. Not everyone who doesn't identify as ace has an 'unproblematic' or 'normative' relationship to sex and sexual attraction. The word 'allosexual' groups straight and SGA people together, which erases the way that these groups relate to sex and sexual attraction differently, particularly because heterosexual attraction is rewarded by society and non-heterosexual attraction isn't. Additionally, many SGA people who do have 'non-normative' relationships to sexual attraction feel they shouldn't have to label the sexual component of their orientation, because being pushed to do so harkens back to homophobic trends of the hypersexualization of SGA identities. Someone who calls themselves a lesbian may be uncomfortable with the idea that their identity is 'sexual' or 'allosexual' until proven otherwise by an ace-spectrum label. The word 'monosexual' creates a similar problem. Again, this groups SGA people with straight people, and many non-MGA people are very uncomfortable with the label being applied to them for that reason, even if it technically, by definition alone, describes their orientation.

As Kay points out, though, the word 'allosexual' plays an important role for asexual people trying to talk about their experiences:

> … it is absolutely vital that we have that kind of language available to us, because even someone who could potentially identify as ace-spectrum but chooses not to is going to have different experiences from someone who does explicitly identify as asexual or acespec - in particular, they are not going to have the experience of intercommunity aggression that, unfortunately, is currently a serious issue for people who identify as ace.

Kay also mentions that, when ne refers to allosexual people, ne isn't referring to people who fit the ace definition but don't claim the label. Discussions about how to resolve this tension are

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[37] The term 'same-gender attracted' is being used here for convenience and brevity. In this context, it's meant to represent lesbian, gay, bisexual, polysexual, pansexual, and multisexual people.

ongoing, and this is "an important conversation that the asexual community needs to have" (Kay).

Lost in Translation

People who do use neo-identities use them because they describe a very specific, often personal experience of gender or attraction. Accurate identity words help people to "know who they are" and to "decide for themselves instead of having terms they don't want forced on them" (Hatch). Having specific words to describe a particular feeling also "[makes] it easier to think about" (Illya), because it provides concise language for an experience that might be quite complicated. Unfortunately, some of the utility of neo-identities is compromised simply because most people aren't familiar with them.

Sometimes people avoid neo-identities (or even labels altogether) not because they aren't useful, but because their usefulness is reduced by mainstream society's understanding of and reaction to those labels. While labels might make your feelings more intelligible to *you*, trying to use those words to make your experiences intelligible to others can be exhausting:

> i think at one point after you've struggled with labels, you reach a point where you're like whatever, i don't care what exact label i use, i know what i am and i'm cool with it … there isn't a lot of awareness about these different labels so it's exhausting explaining all the various ones to well meaning but aggravating people in your life. i usually just refer to myself as queer rather than listing all the labels. (Roe)

Having to explain and re-explain your identity to people who don't understand it becomes draining. Suddenly, the convenience of having a single word to sum up your experiences is gone, because people outside the community (and sometimes within it) aren't familiar with that word. Even when people are polite or genuinely curious, having to constantly explain yourself is still tiring.

Because people are so unfamiliar with them, using neo-identities can also be dangerous. People who use neo-identities are often the targets of ridicule and criticism. Of course, this problem exists for all non-cis and non-straight people. Identifying yourself as non-cis or non-straight is always a risk and can make anyone a target for harassment. Staying 'in the closet' is often a way of keeping oneself safe. For people using neo-identities, 'outing' yourself can mean opening yourself up to ridicule and shaming. Vee expressed a reluctance to identify as openly xenogender or monstergender: "I tend to use [these labels] in a low-key way because I'm nervous about being attacked as a 'Tumblr special snowflake.'" Kay had similar experiences, telling me that many people were supportive, but "I've run afoul of the rabid '[identity] doesn't exist!' types when I commit the unforgivable sin of existing while nonbinary/ace/aro, and talking about my existence."

Criticizing identities that are 'too out there' is one way that people try (consciously or not) to preserve cisheteronormativity. The problem exists even in communities fighting for equal rights: "The sad truth is that we always seem to create feminist and queer movements designed to challenge sexism on the one hand, while simultaneously policing gender and sexuality … on the other" (Serano 2). Hatch also referred to times when go was targeted by people on the internet, including when gore about page was screenshotted and subjected to ridicule and accusations of 'faking.' Hatch also pointed out that using unique identity labels can, conversely, provide a sort of protection: "I use my pronouns, partly, to see who I can trust. People give a lot of new identities shit, and if they know I use them, they'll stay away from me."

The usefulness of labels is often limited by lack of awareness and understanding. At best, this means that people using uncommon labels have to constantly explain themselves to people who haven't heard of their identity. At worst, it means that using an uncommon identity label can

lead to being harassed and ridiculed for trying to be 'a special snowflake' or 'a faker.' The only way to combat this problem is by increasing awareness and continuing to challenge heteronormativity and cisnormativity. The problem of not being understood isn't a reason for doing away with labels altogether, of course; but it is a reason that some people will shy away from using neo-identities.

The Limitations of Language

Some of the limitations of neo-identities and labels are inevitable; because of the very nature of language as a symbolic system, it will always be incapable of fully describing any real-life experience. Real-life experiences are richer than any language can accurately describe. Words will also always signal different things to different people, because everyone has different associations and experiences that they bring to the interpretation of language. Neo-identities, then, never fully escape the problem that they're trying to solve: that language is never inclusive enough and is also always "already speaking," as Judith Butler puts it.

No single neo-identity will ever fully capture someone's unique and personal experience of gender or attraction, even if they invent the word themselves. Many people point out that, however many new identity labels are created, there will never be enough, as someone will always feel they're being left out and need to create a new label. These kinds of problems are inherent in all languages. After I asked about when labels are useful and when they're not, Illya described the utility of labels as follows:

> On one hand, labels are always inaccurate, and they are not 'real' in the same way that what they refer to is real. On the other hand, they are useful because they facilitate communication and understanding. Language is what sets humans apart from the rest of the animal kingdom, it enables rapid communication and learning by the use of "labels", or categorization. If you really think about it, there is no separation between anything, there are no real boundaries between things in the material world. It is something that our brains impose during perception. We perceive between category differences to be wider than within category differences: even in such things as basic and fundamental as color.

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> There is no way you can stop seeing red as being qualitatively different from blue - even though in reality light waves are varying in wavelength and there is no boundary between red and blue - this is something your brain imposes upon reality. No one would say that we should abandon color labels because they do not reflect reality. This is because it is useful to describe colors. Likewise, not describing colors does not make us stop perceiving them as categorical … I think that as long as people understand that labels are not reality, but that they serve a communication purpose, then things are OK. Unfortunately, I also think this is something really difficult to understand - even I confuse myself thinking about it too much. It's because it is impossible to get outside of how our brains function.

Labels are an imperfect way of describing and understanding the world, just as they're an imperfect way of describing gender and attraction. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler calls identity labels "a necessary error" because "every subject position is the site of converging relations of power that are not univocal" (230). Neo-identities are likewise a necessary error.

Like all words, neo-identities also quickly accrue associations with other concepts, and these associations can make people hesitant about using a certain label. Roe pointed out that, despite the benefits, labels "usually carry some preconceived notions attached to them and people might not want to associate with those notions, especially as fledglings in the community." The history of some words can turn people away from them. Particularly unique identity labels are often picked up by internet trolls and turned into a joke.[38] Other words simply have certain associations because of the histories of their root words or their creation—a process known in linguistics as "lexicalization". Kay, for example, considered using the term 'lithromantic' to identify nemself, but the 'lith-' prefix had a connection to stone butch identity that Kay was worried about appropriating. Fortunately, Kay found akoiromantic instead, but plenty of labels have similar associations that make choosing 'the right word' difficult. Words can't always be separated from these associations, and sometimes it's important to remember the

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[38] This can also work in the other direction, though: "Twice actually, nonbinary people took 'joke genders' and made them actual terms. Those were… videogender and nanogender, I believe" (Hatch).

history of a word or the community that word is connected to. Roe discussed this in the context of cishet people using the word 'queer': "it's kind of a hard line between the whole 'labels should not be policed' and 'please don't encroach on queer territory, we have too little of it as it is.'" Roe also made this connection to the desi third gender, "hijra": "i wouldn't want some non-desi person claiming they are 'hijra' because a) they know nothing about the culture, b) they aren't part of the hijra community and haven't been accepted by them, c) it's not their word." For the most part, walking this line seems to come down to accepting people as they are and having a respect for the social and historical relations shared between different words.

The inadequacies of language compromise the utility of neo-identities in many ways, but these problems are less so a reason to 'get rid' of labels than they are a reason to be continually examining and discussing our relationship to linguistic categories. Neo-identities promote conversation even when they don't necessarily make describing oneself easier. Sometimes those conversations become hostile, but they can also be used to create a productive dialogue about gender, attraction, identity, and the language we use to talk about ourselves.

Conclusion

"When goddesses are born, they emerge fully formed: Aphrodite from the sea, Athena from the brow of Zeus. Social movements have no such neat beginnings. Their antecedents are many. They develop over time."

Robert L. Cooper, *Language Planning and Social Change*

When I talk about neo-identities, people often wonder what practical use some of these very obscure, rarely-used words could possibly have as part of a larger social movement. Many neo-identities that describe a very specific, very personal experience won't be integrated into mainstream society. Some of these words will only ever speak to a small handful of people; some of them may only speak to the respective individuals that created them. To call a nonce word like "goreself" or coinage like "monstergender" successful only if it 'sticks' within mainstream language is short-sighted. Language change and lexical creation involve continuous processes and continuous conversations; there isn't necessarily a finish line to be reached. As Robert L. Cooper says in the epigraph above, social movements don't have "neat beginnings," and they don't have neat endings, either.

In this paper, I've examined emerging neo-identities in Tumblr's non-cis and non-straight community. The neo-identities being created and circulated on Tumblr are new, but they reflect the non-cis, non-straight community's history of self-naming, slur reclamation, and lexical creation. While many people see neo-identities as a fad or a form of attention-seeking, these words really represent an attempt to make oneself heard and understood. They represent non-cis and non-straight people inserting themselves into languages that have historically been used to exclude them. For the people I interviewed and many other people on Tumblr, neo-identities are a way of calling attention to the flaws in mainstream understandings of gender and desire. One of the most important things about neo-identities is that they make conversation. They make people

ask questions. Oppressive conceptions of gender and desire are dangerous when they remain unquestioned; when they're taken for granted. Words that describe non-normative experiences of gender and desire expose the constructed nature of damaging cultural norms. Jordana Rosenberg compares these realizations to Alain Badiou's theory of 'the event': "something happens, an 'event,' and it cracks open a seam in the reproduction of the status quo." Neo-identities "crack open a seam"; they cause us to re-evaluate ideas that have been presented to us as natural. They cause us to recognize the wide variety of experiences and identities that can, and do, exist. They force us to ask: what does it mean to experience desire? What does it mean to be gendered?

Besides their potential to call into question dominant cultural ideas, neo-identities are life-saving resources for non-cis and non-straight people who find themselves excluded by normative terminology. The personal benefits of neo-identities can't be ignored. Social change doesn't need to be conceptualized as some large, lofty concept that can't be pinned down – something abstract and inaccessible. If social change is about creating a better world, that creation begins in small gestures and personal changes. Creating an identity word that only a few people will use still contributes to the greater goal of social change. Separating the concept of 'social change' from real-world lives and experiences only serves to make it impossible to achieve. 'Social change' then becomes something that can only be discussed vaguely in academic settings, usually by the people who stand to benefit the least from major changes to the social system. When we look at the lived realities of non-straight and non-cis people, it's clear that neo-identities are creating change and improving lives. Neo-identities create conversation and they affirm the experiences of the people who claim them.

Suggestions for Further Research

This thesis represents an attempt to bring to light the identity work and lexical creation happening on Tumblr, but it is by no means a complete representation of Tumblr's non-cis and non-straight communities. The nine people I interviewed are only a small example of the range of identities present on Tumblr. Future research will hopefully paint a more complete picture of the wide variety of identity words being used.

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, future research should aim to be more inclusive of non-white participants, so that a greater range of perspectives are represented when talking about neo-identities. While many people using neo-identities are young, the perspectives of more people over 30 who use neo-identities would be very beneficial to the research, not only because these perspectives reinforce that neo-identities aren't only a tool of younger people, but also because age and experience influence how people relate to language and labels.

It's interesting to read about how people on Tumblr are currently expressing themselves through neo-identities, but future inquiries should explore how these expressions change over time. A longitudinal study could investigate how neo-identities fare in the long run and how they begin to move offline, into LGBTQ+ campus groups, youth centres, educational resources and, eventually, mainstream vocabulary. How do people using especially uncommon neo-identities begin to establish this language outside of Tumblr? Understanding how identity expression and development happen online can be a great asset for community organizations trying to improve the lives of non-cis and non-straight people *offline*.

The particular neo-identities discussed in this paper are new and developing phenomena. These freshly coined words are still becoming established in non-cis and non-straight communities. The conversations about these words, what they mean for the community, and who

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they can represent are ongoing. Future research should investigate how these conversations

develop.

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