

Entering Doors, Evading Traps: Benefits and Risks of Visibility During Transgender Coming Outs

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Coming out and being visible online can offer transgender and/or non-binary people benefits not found elsewhere. However, it also can expose them to negative reactions and bad experiences. Through an analysis of 15 semi-structured interviews, we investigate the experiences of transgender and/or non-binary people coming out across social media sites (SMSs). We found that participants employed strategies around disclosure and visibility to limit the consequences of coming out and to access support. Using trans theory on visibility, we discuss how online spaces present metaphorical “doors” to resources, support, and recognition—but can also be “traps” for those that do not meet the expectations of the space. We discuss how visibility empowered participants to create “trapdoors” to new spaces within SMSs where they could create positive outcomes for themselves and their communities. We close with considerations for designers as they create online spaces, and present a broader call to action for the HCI community around designing online spaces.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**; *Social networks*; Social networking sites;

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Social networking sites; social media; sexual and gender minorities; LGBTQ; online identity; identity transitions; qualitative work

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1 INTRODUCTION

Social media sites (SMSs) offer people the opportunity to connect with both known and unknown others in ways that they previously could not. However, the ability of social media to foster these connections also creates unique challenges for people as they interact with others across a myriad of platforms. As the number of platforms that a person uses grows, so too does the possibility of audiences becoming unmanageable. These challenges are particularly fraught for social media users who are part of marginalized groups, such as transgender and/or non-binary people,¹ who may bear specific concerns related to their identities.

¹We adopt Meyerowitz’s [48] definition of transgender as an umbrella term for those who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. We use “trans” for the remainder of this paper to denote binary transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming identities.

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Trans people often turn to online spaces to find social support or community that might otherwise be unavailable to them in their offline lives [10, 44]. Finding this support may be difficult for trans people due to concerns about being outed, potential emotional and physical dangers at home, and concerns about harassment online. Furthermore, trans individuals are known to experience life transitions, such as coming out and being visible, far differently than their cisgender peers – impacting how they use social media. The opportunity to find supportive communities online is beneficial in mitigating some of these concerns but comes bundled with risks associated with unknown audiences or context collapse [45, 60]. Where context collapse for the average person might result in an easily resolved misunderstanding, context collapse for a trans person online might result in an inadvertent outing that leads to stigmatizing reactions that can bleed into the offline world and even result in physical harm to the individual [56].

Based on an analysis of semi-structured interviews with 15 trans people who use social media, we identify practices around audience curation, experiences with coming out and being visible, and seeking support. Building on, and also in contrast, with prior work that has focused on trans experiences of disclosure online [28, 30], we approach these experiences through the lens of visibility. While disclosure and visibility are interconnected, we use visibility to broaden our focus beyond disclosure to consider relationships with audiences, often across longer periods of time than a single instance of disclosure. Additionally, visibility invites us to consider the role of resources, from online communities to possible peers, that inform people’s choices and their own willingness to be resources to others.

In this paper, we present utilize the conceptual lens of doors, traps, and trapdoors adapted from the work of transgender theorists Gossett, Stanley, and Burton [25] as a way to interpret individuals’ decision-making around visibility in online spaces. Using Gossett et al.’s lens allows us to see our participants’ experiences in terms of finding “doors” to new spaces that might offer the opportunity to find support and resources, at the risk of falling into “traps” that ultimately result in negative experiences. Yet, there is the possibility of “trapdoors” – features and practices through which people might evade traps and find pathways to spaces that might be more welcoming. We use this lens to investigate how trans people make use of their *social media ecologies*, a nascent framework for studying social media use across multiple platforms, as they come out online.

We utilize this conceptual lens to pose design recommendations for fostering the creation of trapdoors in social media sites and demonstrates the lens’s applicability to social computing work focused on identity disclosure and visibility online. We close with a broader call to action for the social computing community to focus not only on preventing negative experiences but also on building tools that allow individuals to work through negative experiences they might have online.

2 DOORS, TRAPS, AND TRAPDOORS

Social media systems are predicated on connections – to users, posts, and groups, to name a few. However, the acts of friending, joining, and liking come with the reciprocal action of being friended, added as a group member, and listed as someone who responded to a post. These actions create audiences to whom users are made visible, drawing attention to a user’s information, posts, and pictures from the past and in the future. In many cases, visibility is useful. It provides opportunities to find community, to share and receive information, and to simply pass the time. However, for people with marginalized social identities, visibility can cause issues in both online and offline spaces.

Transgender theorists Gossett, Stanley, and Burton have wrestled with the tensions trans visibility can cause, arguing that we live in a time of simultaneous trans visibility and trans violence [25]. On one hand, the visibility of trans people through the production, presentation, and circulation of visual media and culture brings with it cultural recognition and representation. On the other,

the theorists argue that the production of transness is bounded by the racial capitalist systems that privilege whiteness at the expense of those of low-income or of color — the people who are in actuality at the forefront of creating this visibility. In presenting this dichotomy, Gossett et al. argue that the stark contrast between visibility and violence traps trans people into models of representation that do not offer them adequate support or protection. To be white and trans is to be more accepted and protected as acceptable or within norms; to be anything else is unacceptable, even when the very nature of transness is being produced by so many who are not white or affluent. Gossett et al. refer to this as the *trap of the visual*: “it [visibility] offers—or, more accurately, it is frequently offered to us as—the primary path through which trans people might have access to livable lives” [25]. For example, while in 2014 Katy Steinmetz’s TIME article hailed the “transgender tipping point” as the moment in which trans people were becoming more visible and accepted in American society [58], in 2020 at least 27 trans or gender non-conforming people have lost their lives (many of whom were Black transgender women)².

The stark reality of visibility privileging some at the expense of others leads Gossett et al. to argue that trans visibility can be understood as “doors” and “traps” [25]. Doors act as “...entrances to visibility, to resources, to recognition, and to understanding” [25]. Doors are moments where what or who was previously invisible, or at the margins, becomes centered in our cultural consciousness. “Yet... these doors,” they continue, “are almost always also ‘traps’ — accommodating trans bodies, histories, and culture only insofar as they can be forced to hew to hegemonic modalities” [25]. For Gossett et al., visibility results from evolving norms about what identities are acceptable, which in turn leads to access to resources and recognition previously unattainable. Yet, visibility and acceptance are never universally inclusive; for every individual whose identity becomes part of the normative as a result of these shifts, there are others whose identities are still considered non-normative. As a result, these shifts in attitudes do not benefit all individuals. Instead, they specifically benefit those who fall within the newly-normative spectrum of identities, pushing all others to the margins.

Gossett et al. note that visibility can be good, so long as there is an understanding of the “trap” that comes along with it. Doors can be useful to move us forward as a society, but all doors are concurrent traps for certain people because they do not fit with the norm created by the door. For example, the “trap” of trans visibility is being expected to conform to society’s expectation of what a trans person “looks like” and what the experience of interacting with a trans person “feels like.” For many trans people of color, this door of trans visibility is a trap. They might situationally be able to access the resources, recognition, and understanding that come with visibility, but they might also be forced to deal with stigma when they do not conform to that new normative expectation that trans people are white and socioeconomically privileged.

Traps of visibility are not new, nor are they restricted to only this moment in time. For example, during the queer rights movement that sprung up in the wake of the Stonewall Riots of 1969, sub-communities of poor, non-white, trans people were pushed to the fringes of the movement because they did not conform to the societal expectation of what “queer” should be — white, cisgender, and middle-class. The trap of visibility pushed these people to the margins, despite the central role they played in the Stonewall Riots [52].

If doors are always traps, Gossett et al. do propose an alternative — that of trapdoors, “those clever contraptions that are not entrances or exits but secret passageways that take you someplace else, often someplace else yet unknown” [25]. Trapdoors themselves are doors, but doors that lead to places not yet known; they may be traps, but they may also be spaces to receive the resources and visibility without contending with a trap. In other words, trapdoors are opportunities to escape to

²<https://www.hrc.org/resources/violence-against-the-trans-and-gender-non-conforming-community-in-2020>

something new. They offer the opportunity for those not in the majority to imagine and ultimately work towards enacting a future that is fully representative and ultimately provides the resources, recognition, and understanding that they are just as deserving of. However, in doing so, there is always the risk they might create new traps that were previously unanticipated. Where Gossett et al. describe doors and traps as a cultural moment (e.g., the visibility and subsequent representation given to the queer movement as a singular door through which all pass, but for some that door is also a trap), we see the inherent structure and function of social media sites creating unique doors and traps for each individual. The level of connectedness and the resulting composition of an audience on any given platform is directly controllable by the person creating an account and being visible.

We use the conceptual, critical lens provided by Gossett et al. to discuss our participants' decisions around visibility online and the labor they undertook in entering doors, encountering traps, and making use of trapdoors to escape those traps. Whether coming out on a platform, deciding not to join another platform, or reaching out to others for information or support, we repeatedly saw our participants contending with the trap of visibility as it manifests in online spaces. In providing this analysis through the original lens, we translate Gossett et al.'s conceptual, critical theory into a conceptual lens that accounts for the practical realities of existing and being visible to others in social media systems. While Gossett et al. argue that visibility and the doors and traps that lead to it operate at a societal level, we argue that in social media systems it operates at an individual level because of the nature of how our offline lives are represented online. Thinking through how visibility manifests at an individual level in sociotechnical systems, we offer suggestions for designs that account for how the trap of visibility manifests in our social media systems and the relationships that are represented in individuals' social media ecologies, and suggest how adopting the lens of doors, traps, and trapdoors might help designers reconsider how these systems provide support to those making identity disclosures online.

3 RELATED WORK

To this point, we have used the term “visibility” to describe two different concepts. Gossett et al.'s use of the term sits in conversation with a long line of work from media studies concerned with visual culture and the representation that arises from portrayals of groups in popular culture and mass media. In the aftermath of the Stonewall Riots, media portrayals of queer people became important in normalizing these identities as part of the queer rights movement [32]. However, the representations of gay and lesbian people in mass media, such as television, presented a vision of queer people as white, urban, and socioeconomically advantaged [4] — clearly, the trap of the visual had been sprung.

In contrast to Gossett et al.'s focus on the visibility of societal groups, scholarship in internet studies and social computing commonly focuses on the visibility of individuals, their control over the visibility of their identity in online spaces, and the consequences of that visibility — in line with the definition of *selective visibility* offered by Carrasco and Kerne [8]. In other words, when one comes out to a specific audience in an online space (such as Facebook), one has allowed their identity to become visible to that group and must subsequently contend with the consequences of that visibility.

When one analyzes this social computing approach to visibility through the lens of Gossett et al., one can see how coming out online acts as a double-edged sword. While online visibility offers the opportunity to access resources and communities that might otherwise be unavailable, it can simultaneously expose one to negative or stigmatizing experiences. In using the term “stigma”, we draw on Bockting et al., who defined stigma as enacted (actual experiences of rejection and discrimination) and felt (perceived rejection or discrimination, often stemming from lived

experiences) [5]. Thus, decisions around coming out not only involve immediate considerations, but also considerations about what could happen in the future.

In this paper, we investigated how trans people navigated decisions about coming out and contending with the pros and cons of this visibility across their various social media presences. To situate our work, we begin by discussing the importance of online spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly for trans individuals. We then discuss research focused on decisions about online visibility broadly, including considering the imagined audience and the context collapse that can sometimes result from one's imagined audience not matching up with the actual audience of a space. Next, we consider existing work in social computing that looks at the impacts of visibility on trans experiences, connecting to other social computing work as appropriate. Finally, we discuss social media ecologies and the act of selecting spaces to be present in online, and the implications those decisions have on visibility and subsequent experiences, particularly for trans people online.

3.1 Transgender Identity within the LGBTQ+ Community

Transgender individuals face unique challenges with coming to know their own gender identities in comparison to their cisgender peers. Where cisgender identity is largely accepted, transgender identity is not. Further, portrayals of transgender identity online and in the media can have damaging effects on trans individuals with little access to support. Cavalcante's framework of unlearning [9] describes three stages across which trans people come to understand their identities through the unlearning of problematic or negative representations of trans people in media. The first stage involves unlearning problematic portrayals in popular media such as television or the internet. The second stage is unlearning the negative perceptions often applied to trans people by their LGB counterparts, highlighting the differing experiences that the two groups have. The third and final stage consists of helping others "shed their thick shell of misconception" [9].

As denoted by Cavalcante, trans experiences differ greatly from broader LGB+ experiences. Trans individuals are predicted to face higher incidents of identity-based discrimination and violence than their cisgender peers [26, 37]; trans women of color are particularly vulnerable [50]. The emotional harm of misgendering, the intentional or unintentional act of getting one's gender pronouns wrong, is primarily a concern for non-cisgender people [36, 46]. Transgender individuals also face unique and costly legal and health barriers [38, 40]. Given the different experiences between gender minorities (e.g., trans people) and sexual minorities, transphobia can be found within cisgender members of the LGB+ community as well [63].

Further, different identities that are commonly placed under the umbrella of "trans" have differential experiences and needs. Until recently, non-binary identities have largely been left out of conceptualizations of trans identity. For example, Killermann originally defined "trans*" as anyone who "is not a cisgender man or woman" only later appending non-conforming or non-binary individuals to their definition [39]. Scholars such as Valentine, include non-binary identities in their definition based on empirical evidence shared by participants [59]. However, more recent work has shown that much like discussions around including binary trans identities under the LGBT umbrella, privileging of binary normative genders under the trans umbrella has othered non-binary individuals [13].

Given the unique experiences of binary and non-binary trans individuals, it is crucial that trans experiences be studied separately from LGB experiences. Studying trans experiences as part of the larger LGBTQ+ community is compromised when part of the trans experience is navigating negative perceptions from the LGB sub-communities. For these reasons, we focus explicitly on trans experiences of coming out online, including both binary and non-binary experiences.

3.2 Transgender Identity Online

The importance of online spaces for LGBTQ+ people has motivated a rise in social computing scholarship on LGBTQ+ experiences. Online spaces play a critical role for LGBTQ+ people [11, 24, 44] — especially when they are young in age [44]. LGBTQ+ youth spend more time online and have more online friends than their non-LGBTQ+ peers [51]. These spaces are consequential for their mental health and well-being [44] as well. 70% of LGBTQ+ youth report that online interactions reduce their feelings of isolation and loneliness [34] and 52% found communities of support in online spaces that they did not have access to offline [ibid.].

While choices around online visibility are crucial for all LGBTQ+ people, the importance of these spaces is more pronounced for trans people [21, 35, 57]. In response to these experiences and with the awareness that trans experiences differ significantly from larger LGBTQ+ experiences, HCI scholars have begun to shift the focus of social media research towards the specific experiences of trans people (e.g., [28–31, 56]). Coming out on social media enables trans people to seek and receive support from their social networks across different social media sites [10, 24, 27]. However, their visibility simultaneously opens them up to the possibility of stigmatizing reactions [30], including harassment and trolling [56]. Exposure to stigmatizing reactions from other Internet users can contribute to negative outcomes such as the development of negative mental health or suicidal ideation [49], risks that are more pronounced for trans and/or non-binary groups in comparison to lesbian, gay, or bisexual groups [ibid.].

3.3 Visibility Across Social Media Ecologies

Trans individuals do not just deal with pressures and perceptions from the larger LGBTQ+ community. They must also carefully consider their coming outs and subsequent visibility to larger, more varied audiences. We use the term visibility to refer to the outcomes of decisions that people make about what to post online about themselves and the resultant presence they have in a given space as a result of that sharing [7]. In the context of LGBTQ+ experiences, visibility is often related to being out within a given space by one's own choice, a type of visibility termed *selective visibility* [8].

In navigating their visibility online, people often grapple with the *imagined audience*, their “mental conceptualization of the people with whom they are communicating, their audience” [41]. Within their imagined audiences individuals often consider abstract and targeted audiences when posting, where abstract audiences are ambiguous in the mind of the individual and targeted imagined audiences are audiences that the individual wants to specifically reach with a post [42]. Litt and Hargittai, for example, subdivide the targeted audience into four sub-groups: personal (themselves, friends, or family), communal (communities, most often centered around hobbies, experiences, locations, or ideologies), professional (people known in the context of work), and phantasmal groups (illusory relationships with celebrities, animals, brands, or the deceased) [42]. Correctly determining who is in a given audience and tailoring posts to that audience is important; misidentifying who is in an audience can lead to posts that violate norms held by that audience (termed context collapse [15, 45, 60, 64]), leading to negative or stigmatizing reactions.

Yet, complicating the process of navigating one's audiences is social media's obfuscation of who is in the audience [16]. Thus, one can imagine an audience for a post but perceive a different audience to be present, which can impact how privacy-making behaviors and audience management tactics are used [61]. In the case of trans individuals, mismatches between the imagined and actual can cause embarrassment, but can also present the risk of emotional or physical harm [28]. When people actively manage their visibility online, they engage in two types of behaviors: reaching and limiting [43]. Reaching behaviors describe those that involve actions that specifically target

an imagined audience or actively seeking out a targeted imagined audience. Limiting behaviors, meanwhile, involve “steganography” or making a post technically available to anyone but only socially interpretable by a select few [43].

In contrast to the platform-centric and specific approach found in other work, Zhao et al. [66] proposed *social media ecologies* as a framework for understanding how people use individual SMSs as part of a larger ecology. They argued that scholars should attend to how people make decisions about where they post content based on the different audiences and norms across platforms. Zhao et al. found that people consider their desired audience and their expectations when deciding where to share content [66]. However, differences between audiences and content across platforms can result in tensions. For example, when content tailored for the audience on one platform is reposted to another platform, it might allow people to see content that was not intended for them to see. Similar tensions emerge when social media contacts are connected to people on multiple platforms, blurring the boundaries around intended audiences.

To manage the tensions caused by audiences being obfuscated and platform lines blurring, users often fall back on affordances offered by platforms to control who will see what and when [14]. Some work proposes affordance-based approaches to self-presentation [16], which can account for some of these management behaviors such as controlling what content is linked to a persona on a given platform. However, affordance-based approaches to disclosure and visibility (vis a vis self-presentation) fail to account for a user’s ability to move to new platforms or even create new spaces in platforms through opening new accounts.

Studying self-presentation across social media ecologies has prompted questions about how people present themselves across online spaces and audiences. For example, Duffy et al. [19] found that the identities creative workers created largely overlapped across platforms, but were also differentiated according to the platform features, the real and imagined audiences of the platform, and what the person was trying to accomplish on that specific platform. Elsewhere, work found that young adults make careful decisions about self-presentation depending on the audiences on a particular SMS to avoid violating the expectations specific audiences may have on that site, particularly family members and future employers [18]. In these cases, we see people creating identities that have platform-specific details but are largely similar between platforms.

However, differences can be more pronounced across platforms, particularly when people go through life transitions and their identities change (e.g., [1, 2, 55]). As such, adopting the ecological view of social media is particularly useful when studying the experiences of LGBTQ+ people across these sites. While earlier work frequently found people used different platforms for similar purposes (such as both Tumblr and Facebook for information seeking or community support [24, 33]), recent scholarship has adopted an ecological approach to describe how users engage with different platforms and audiences during transition and disclosure (e.g., [28]) and the tensions between positive and negative encounters as a result of coming out online across different platforms [17]. For example, Haimson focuses on trans experiences of disclosure, social support seeking, and the effect of social media use on mental health [28]. He coined the term *social transition machinery* to describe “the ways that, for people facing life transitions, multiple social media sites remain separate and serve different purposes, yet work together to facilitate life transitions” [28]. Here Haimson extends the social media ecology framework to investigate how people reconstruct their identities across multiple platforms in times of identity transition to further their self-presentation goals [28]. Similarly, DeVito, et al. studied how LGBTQ+ individuals, including non-binary people, make decisions about their self-presentation across their SMSs [17]. They found that participants used their various social media platforms to curate audiences and present their LGBTQ+ identity while concurrently avoiding stigmatizing reactions. They conceptualize this platform use and audience curation as space-building, where space is a user’s audience within the larger platform.

For marginalized people, such as LGBTQ+ people, DeVito, et al. found that creating spaces of safety online is imperative for well-being.

As illustrated in the work of scholars such as DeVito and Haimson, having places of safety online is important for trans people as they come to their identity. The work from these researchers approaches spaces ecologically, allowing us to investigate how audiences and spaces begin to overlap and create difficulties for users (in this case, trans users). However, prior work focuses on spaces that already exist, paying less attention to how people find or create new spaces when their previous spaces become inadequate, or worse, fail them. Accordingly, in this work we investigated how trans individuals came out online and found new spaces of safety in which they could be authentic without risk of harm or stigma. Analyzing these experiences through the conceptual lens of doors, traps, and trapdoors enable us to understand how individuals took steps to protect themselves when coming out in online spaces that they already inhabited, while simultaneously finding new spaces that could offer them better opportunities at building communities of support for their new identity.

4 METHODS

4.1 Participants

To investigate the coming out experiences of trans people on social media, we conducted a series of exploratory interviews with 15 trans social media users. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 40 ($M = 26.5$; $SD = 5.33$). Participants self-identified their gender identities and reported being active regularly on at least three social media sites. We report demographic information for each participant except for P14 (whose interview was untranscribable, as described in the next section) in Table 1.

Participants were recruited using social media posts to the first and third authors' social networks, through posts in private, queer-friendly groups on Facebook, and through targeted advertising to queer and queer-adjacent campus groups at a large R1 university. Recruitment posts contained a brief text blurb about the project, an image accompaniment that had more information about the project, and two links – one to a research lab website that had more information about the project and the researchers, and the other to a form where participants could indicate interest in being contacted about the study. All recruitment material and research material (e.g., interview protocol) was reviewed and approved by our institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Participants noted during interviews that they found this recruitment design to be inclusive for several reasons. First, providing in-depth information and context about both the researchers and the research enabled participants to assess the rigor and safety of the research. Second, the practice of using a form instead of having potential participants email us first allowed participants two chances to opt-out of the study; they could not fill out the form, or not answer the follow-up email sent after they had completed the form. This recruitment design placed the impetus on us to initiate contact and schedule interviews, not on the potential participants.

4.2 Interviews

Interviews ranged from 30 to 120 minutes, and were conducted over the phone ($n = 12$), via video chat ($n = 2$), or through text-based instant messaging ($n = 1$) [62], according to participants' desires. Where applicable, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by undergraduate research assistants (in the case of the instant message interview, the transcript of the conversation was saved). Interviews lasted between 30 and 120 minutes in length. All transcribed interviews were anonymized. One interview (P14) recording proved to be un-transcribable due to poor audio recording quality, leaving us with 14 transcribed interviews. However, we include the fifteenth

Participant	Age	Gender Identity	Primary SMS
P01	23	Non-binary, genderfluid	Twitter
P02	30	Transgender woman	Tumblr
P03	23	Transgender woman, gender non-conforming, genderfluid	Facebook
P04	25	Transgender man	Reddit
P05	23	Non-binary, agender	Facebook
P06	31	Transgender woman	Facebook
P07	26	Transgender woman	Twitter
P08	23	Transgender, genderfluid, genderqueer, gender non-conforming	Facebook
P09	27	Transgender man, non-binary	Facebook
P10	30	Transgender man	Facebook
P11	29	Transgender woman	Facebook
P12	23	Transgender man, non-binary	Tumblr
P13	40	Woman, transgender woman, transsexual woman	Facebook
P14	N/A	N/A	N/A
P15	18	Transgender man, non-binary	Discord

Table 1. Participant Demographics

interview in our analysis based on the notes interviewers took while in conversation with that participant.

We employed an exploratory, semi-structured approach to interviews that enabled participants to openly discuss their experiences. After obtaining consent and recording relevant demographic information, we asked participants to discuss their experiences coming to and disclosing their identities online. In response to participants' stories about these experiences, interviewers utilized in-depth follow-up questions to understand how participants' experiences were different on various social media platforms, including differences in audience composition, posting habits, and the types of interactions participants had with their audiences.

4.3 Data Analysis

We performed an inductive, thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews [6]. We conducted our analysis concurrently with the interview process, allowing us to adjust the interview protocol to account for new or unexpected themes that emerged during the analysis. Recruitment concluded after we reached saturation (i.e., no new themes or codes emerged from data), after 15 interviews.

The first and second authors split the interviews, with each author open coding nine interviews (five interviews individually each, plus four interviews that both authors coded). The third author coded four interviews that overlapped with either the first or second author. This division of coding ensured that all interviews were coded while also providing overlap in coding to enable authors to have discussions about what they were seeing in the data while conducting the open coding.

After completing a preliminary round of open coding in this manner, the research team discussed emergent themes and formed conceptual mappings of how these themes were connected. Using these themes and mappings, the first and second authors wrote detailed memos about the various codes, which helped us solidify the themes and the connections between them [54]. We then returned to the interviews with these themes in mind to ensure their robustness against our participants' articulated experiences. Last, the first author wrote detailed theme memos describing the final themes and their relationships to each other [54]. Our analysis yielded three principal findings which we discuss below.

5 FINDINGS

Our participants discussed actively using a variety of SMSs, often simultaneously. Similar to what DeVito et al.'s participants reported [17], our participants described using platform affordances to create spaces and audiences that were both platform-specific but that also moved across platform boundaries. Participants used these spaces to come out and be visible without experiencing stigmatizing reactions from others. As a result of this visibility, they were empowered to act reciprocally and provide resources in their online spaces that benefited themselves, the trans community specifically, and their entire social networks. Across all of their social media sites, participants discussed the sites in terms of the audiences they had on those sites.

We found a difference in participants talking about their use of technical affordances on a specific site (the platform) and participants talking about their audiences (the space). We draw a distinction between these two terms; a platform is a social media site (such as Instagram), while a space is unique within a platform (like an account and that account's audience). For example, Instagram is a platform on which a single user might have multiple spaces via multiple accounts. Each of these accounts can have a different audience. Spaces are not limited to just being accounts; they can also be created using features within a platform, like Facebook Groups.

Throughout the remainder of this work, we will use the terms *social media site* or *social media platforms* interchangeably when discussing a platform itself and the technical affordances inherent to that platform; we will use the term *social media space* when discussing the audiences and resultant spaces participants built within a given platform.

In this section, we begin by characterizing which social media platforms our participants used. We then report our findings as they relate to four principal themes. First, we discuss how participants made decisions about what platforms to incorporate into their personal social media ecologies, and how they determined whom to connect with on those platforms. Then, we report participants' experiences with disclosing their trans identity in those created spaces, followed by how they navigated the visibility that resulted from those disclosures. Finally, we discuss the perceived risks that participants felt from their visibility, and how they forecasted dealing with negative reactions if and when they occurred.

5.1 Opening Doors to New Spaces

Adopting visibility as a lens extends disclosure beyond a consideration of to whom one is visible, but also to what spaces are available, what possibilities those spaces offer options that people can enter, what possibilities they can identify with and adopt as their own. Online spaces are important to trans people as they connect to resources and connect with peers. However, online spaces that

Table 2. Participants' Reported Platform Use
(Primary Platform, Second-Most Used Platform, and So On)

Platform	Primary	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth
Facebook	9	2	3		
Twitter	2	4	4		
Tumblr	2	1			
Reddit	1		1	1	
Discord	1				
Instagram		6	1	1	1
Snapchat			1	2	
LinkedIn			2		
GoFundMe					1
MySpace					1

people already exist in might not provide the appropriate resources. While these existing spaces might eventually be repurposed in support of one's needs, trans people also have to search for new spaces, "doors" in Gossett et al.'s terminology, that are supportive to their experiences even while calcifying their emerging identity.

Participants used different platforms to curate audiences and spaces for different purposes. Most participants indicated that Facebook was their primary platform of use ($n = 9$), followed by Twitter ($n = 2$), Tumblr ($n = 2$), Reddit ($n = 1$) and Discord ($n = 1$). See Table 2 for a detailed breakdown.

While Facebook was often reported as the primary platform of use, our participants also told us that Facebook was often the space in which they had the largest audience. They reasoned this was because they had often been on Facebook for the longest period of time, thus most of the people from their social spheres were also on it. As a result, their Facebook audiences often included family members, close friends, people they knew from high school or their hometown, college friends, and friends and connections made during adulthood:

I think I have like 1700 friends on Facebook. I don't know how large that is in the world of social networking, but it's also a pretty tight connection. It's people that I've met. I don't generally add people that I don't know who they are. (P09)

However, because Facebook represented so many offline connections from a longer time span (often stretching back into adolescence for our participants), it was not the place to explore new identities or interests. Instead, participants described having spaces in other platforms where they had more tightly curated audiences that participants created for specific reasons. P08, for example, used Twitter specifically to connect with fellow academics:

I follow basically academics in my field ... The only reason I got Twitter, to be honest with you, was because everyone in my (field) has a Twitter like the rising scholars are... so I was like, "Okay I might just get one because everyone else has one." (P08)

P08's experience illustrates how participants used different platforms. Where P08 used Twitter as a place for academic discourse related to their graduate work and disciplinary community, for P03 it was a place for "shitposting," or joking around, with friends.

I think like, Twitter is like a lot more shitposting, yeah. (P03)

The differences between P03's and P08's use of Twitter highlights how participants used different platforms to curate different audiences for different purposes. What one participant used a platform

for might be completely different than what another participant used the same platform for, and correspondingly the audiences they curated would be different as well.

These differences in uses was important for our participants as they came to their identities and came out because they created spaces specifically for their trans identities but also had spaces that were not originally constructed to support their trans identities (as P08's use of Twitter illustrates).

Regardless of the original intention of a space, participants would often have to come out in those spaces, and so they thought carefully about creating and entering into a new space, as articulated by P08 who created their Twitter for academic purposes, but still came out in that space:

Yea, like, well, on my little like profile part, I do put like trans scholar, trans and bi plus scholar, and I put like my research interests. (P08)

However, complicating our participants' evaluations of the potential spaces they could create or join was that who was in the audience of a given space was often nebulous.

5.1.1 Crossing and Maintaining Platform Boundaries. Often, the boundaries between audiences or spaces were not socially or technically well defined. Audience members could be parts of several different spaces, thus crossing space or platform boundaries. Boundary crossing was frequently noted between Facebook and other platforms, where participants would be friends with everyone on Facebook, but only allow certain people to be connected to them on other platforms:

Honestly, my Tumblr and Discord communities [are] more or less, the same people. (P18)

While participants framed platforms they used in terms of the audience they had on that specific platform, they also held opinions about platforms they were not engaged in. Frequently these perceptions were formed based on the opinions of audiences on the platforms they were engaged in. For example, P12 discussed Reddit as being a negative space according to their audience on Tumblr, and as a result decided to stay away from Reddit:

Also I definitely avoid Reddit. It kind of has a reputation on Tumblr as [a] more right-wing and toxic culture. (P12)

In line with prior work finding that LGBTQ+ users often need to rely on more than one platform when coming out online [20], our participants noted using their social media accounts in a variety of ways unique to each individual. Each participant used platforms to create spaces and audiences that served their unique needs. For example, P12's articulation of Tumblr, including who is in their audience and what they use the space they created in Tumblr for, was unique to P12. Another participant might create an entirely different space on Tumblr to accomplish a different goal than P12. Similarly, the space created on Tumblr by P12 might be more like the space created on Twitter by another individual than that person's Tumblr. Participants' discussion of platforms was actually about the space they created within the platform, which became important as they made decisions about who (and where) to come out to online.

In our participants' experiences, we see an important distinction from prior work focusing on social media ecologies (e.g., [17]) – where this prior work has focused on how different platforms fit into an individual's larger ecosystem online, our participants' articulations of spaces within platforms draws attention to the types of identities that these platforms can support. For example, P03 told us about their two Instagram accounts: the first was public and could be followed by anyone, while the second was tightly controlled and used to post specific content that P03 had deemed inappropriate to share more widely. We heard variations of P03's description of spaces *within* platforms from many of our participants.

As part of creating these spaces within social media sites, participants thought carefully about whom they wanted in their audience as part of that space. The decisions around audiences became

more important when disclosing identity, and perceptions of who was in the audience impacted where and in what order our participants disclosed their trans identities. We next discuss these processes of disclosure.

5.2 Disclosing Across Social Media Spaces

In contrast to some prior work which positioned coming out as the end of one's identity journey (e.g., [47]), our participants discussed coming out as part of an *ongoing* journey of acceptance in line with work in both CSCW (e.g., [28]) and elsewhere (e.g., [53]). Participants' processes of coming out frequently followed a trajectory composed of several distinct disclosures across their social media ecosystems. Previous work has demonstrated that online spaces are important for LGBTQ+ (e.g., [24]) and specifically for trans people to find information and support (e.g., [21]). Our participants' experiences echo these findings, as they told us that they often came to better understand their trans identities in the spaces that they had curated within social media platforms. Participants would often come out on these platforms earlier than they would offline because they had created a space that was safe and supportive, in contrast to other spaces that might have audiences that less friendly to trans people (e.g., a Facebook with connections to extended family or friends from high school). The decision to disclose in these spaces before others ensured that there would be a community in a place that participants could rely on as they made later coming out posts, similar to experiences noted in other work [29]:

I [came out] with a post on both platforms. I'm sure I tailored it a little... for the platform... or the people. I did link to a more detailed document (about trans identity), so I gave kind of just the real real brief summary. (P13)

In contrast to these early disclosures, participants often waited to come out on Facebook until later, due to the nature of their audience and the resultant space of Facebook. Facebook was often seen as an extension of offline life, due to its social ties to family members and offline friends. For example, P10 used Facebook to come out to their larger social network:

When I had completed my legal name change and I was two months on testosterone, I used Facebook as a platform for coming out to all of the people I did not have intimate conversations with on a regular basis, but who I figured I would want to be able to look me up someday, somehow. (P10)

Coming out on Facebook frequently required participants to do prior supporting labor in the form of coming out to family and close friends offline, particularly those who might not be members of the participants' audiences on other platforms. For example, P09 explains how they came out to their family directly:

I individually messaged each one of them [family members] on Facebook because I'm not super close to them. I messaged all the ones that had - that weren't super close. So I messaged my brother, my sister, and like extended family. Um, I think mostly via Facebook. (P09)

Participants did this labor to ensure that important contacts, like close friends or family, did not feel blindsided or out-of-the-loop by their coming out post on Facebook, and to promote a positive reaction to the post on Facebook.

5.2.1 Positive Reactions to Coming Out. Across the spaces that participants created and occupied on social media, they noted that they received overwhelmingly positive reactions from their audiences in response to their coming out posts. P07 discussed coming out on Facebook and the positive response they got in the aftermath of posting:

The immediate response was very positive. A lot of people who were similarly disadvantaged reached out and said “Thank you so much for what you said, that was really powerful and really brave of you.” which was like, “Yay, great, I feel good about myself now.” (P07)

Participants offered several different rationales for this response and the corresponding lack of negative responses. First, they pointed to the supporting work they did offline, particularly when coming out on Facebook, as discussed previously, which helped limit the number of important audience members who were surprised by the coming out post:

The response I got was positive but part of it was because I had already done some ground work ... A lot of the people within certain circles of socialness knew already. (P11)

Second, participants reasoned that social norms they perceived to be present on different platforms often kept people from responding negatively to the post itself, instead acting out their negative responses in other, less explicit ways. Two common reactions participants noted as things they might consider negative were silence or non-interaction and an audience member removing themselves from the audience (i.e., through unfriending on Facebook). For example, P11 noted a norm about Facebook, that if there is not anything to say that you say nothing at all:

Anyone who disagreed [with my identity] vehemently didn’t post. (P11)

P09 imagined a variation of this reason for the limited negative response, reasoning that people who had nothing to say might disconnect from them on Facebook instead of saying something (or nothing).

Lastly, participants expressed the opinion that the type of people they knew or were connected with were “good”. Participants attributed the quality of their audience to either their curated audiences and spaces or to sheer luck:

Because I have been lucky enough to know a lot of people who’s best is pretty good. (P10)

Regardless of the reason, our participants told us of positive reactions to their disclosure and subsequent visibility. Whether this was because their audiences were inherently “pretty good”, as P10 discussed, or because they had done work in support of themselves, participants were then able to use the resulting visibility within their spaces to help others and educate their audiences in order to make them more welcoming.

5.3 Visibility After Coming Out

After coming out across their various social media sites, participants discussed making several decisions about self-presentation in their various online spaces. Many participants noted that how they presented themselves within different online spaces changed after having come out in that space, similar to participants interviewed by Haimson and others described on Facebook [30]. A common change participants made in their strategies across all platforms was the type of visual representation they used (i.e., a profile picture):

I wanted to present a particular way and I ... knew I wasn’t able to do that then. Now I feel much much less self conscious about it so I do and have posted more photos, but it’s taken me awhile to get to this place. (P07)

Participants talked about using pictures that were not of themselves, such as inanimate objects, animals, or fictional characters, as their profile pictures before coming out. After coming out, participants often began using pictures of themselves because they felt more comfortable about themselves and their appearance. Other changes in self-presentation included changing profile or

bio descriptors to include pointers about their trans identity, or changing the codified gender or sexual identity fields in profiles. Some participants managed their self-presentation to a greater extent, deleting dead name references or scrubbing their accounts of pictures from before they came out:

I definitely look to see what I have posted in the past and stuff. In most case I kept everything that was already out there ... I did delete some of the old pictures. (P13)

However, an equal number of our participants made the conscious decision not to undertake this form of self-presentation management, reasoning that it was inauthentic to delete things from their past:

I wanted to have a log of ... where I was at that point in time and also to be held accountable for the views that I held then. I didn't want to just erase it like it never happened because it did. (P01)

Regardless of the decisions that participants made about their self-presentation strategies and account scrubbing, participants contended with the concept of visibility, and the pros and cons associated with being visible in their online spaces.

5.3.1 Visibility for Educating. Participants often experienced or expected to experience some type of negative interaction in their spaces, regardless of the level of audience curation, as a result of their visibility. For most of our participants, they anticipated this occurring rather than experiencing it firsthand, and discussed what they anticipated experiencing in the future through the lens of stories they had heard from others. The experiences that they discussed experiencing or hearing about anecdotally were generally of harassment or targeted trolling as a result of being visibly trans in an online space.

Even in the face of these very real concerns, our participants still found it worthwhile to be visible online. Participants discussed two positive actions they could accomplish through their visibility – education and reciprocity – which benefited their various audiences and themselves. We use the term “education” to refer to actions participants took to provide information or resources to their general audiences about being trans or about trans-specific or -adjacent issues. Participants noted actively educating others through posting or commenting as a means of making their networks aware of important issues or to help protect the community at large:

I knew that my friends list did not have a lot of exposure to trans people. [I wanted to] show them that, yes we are normal people, we do normal stuff, we have normal dreams in life and such. (P13)

Other participants noted being visible as a means to educate was a passive action, accomplished through posting or blogging without a specific audience in mind:

I will post about and promote music and comic books primarily by or featuring trans women or trans men. (P07)

Both active and passive educators noted that being visible gave them an amount of power, particularly when being called into conversations that they would be considered experts on (specifically, trans issues). They also noted that visibility was powerful in the wake of the 2016 US Presidential election because they felt empowered to speak directly to their audience about the effects they would experience as a result of Donald Trump's victory in the election. P10 exemplifies this empowerment, describing what they did in the aftermath of the election to educate their audiences about the tangible impacts that Trump's election might have on them:

I was very scared that some kind of wacky executive order might come down that would somehow make it ... harder for me. I wanted to make sure that people who knew

me and cared about me ... could understand that was an example of a way that the Trump-Pence administration was not merely annoying but truly frightening. (P10)

5.3.2 Reciprocity. While education was often aimed at cisgender audiences, participants also described undertaking reciprocal actions within the trans community. These included actions that participants were able to take in support of the trans community, such as sharing information or simply being visible and thus a source of strength to others who had not come out yet. Participants discussed feeling an obligation to their community to be visible and provide support. Feelings of obligation came from having received support from others during their coming out process, and so participants wanted to do the same for others who were in their position. Participants either provided support directly or indirectly, but regardless of the method of support, they found it to be a useful thing to do for others in acknowledgment of the support they themselves had received:

I also think has been really nice since then is I had a number of people reach out privately to me and say “Seeing you and photos of you on your Facebook or on your whatever - probably on my Facebook - I wanted to let you know that I am also trans and I’m not out yet but I wanted to reach out and ask for help, ask for advice, for friendship, etcetera.” (P07)

In addition to helping their audiences and communities, participants also found these supportive actions both fulfilling and self-affirming. The dual benefit that participants perceived their actions having for both their community and themselves made the risks associated with being visible worthwhile because participants felt they would not be able to undertake these positive actions if they were not visible:

I think a lot of people are trying to provide support for other people. Which in turn, I think, provides us with support for ourselves. They support us, justify their existence, you know? So there’s that kind of thing I think is probably most common. (P09)

Participants found that their visibility enabled them to accomplish things that would not have been as effective (or even possible) if they were not visibly trans in their various spaces. However, visibility was not just a pathway to positive outcomes. Visibility also creates the risk of negative reactions from audience members, particularly in larger, less curated spaces such as Facebook. While our participants told us that being visible and providing education and support to others was important to them, they also felt the tensions that this visibility caused regarding their safety. Thus, determining what level of risk was acceptable to them as a result of their visibility was an important part of coming out and being subsequently visible online. In the next section, we discuss participants’ forecasting of the risks and potential outcomes that could result from their visibility, and how participants took steps to mitigate those outcomes.

5.4 Managing the Consequences of Visibility

Our participants, like most trans people, described a process of self-discovery, including a search for support resources and supportive communities. Their process was deeply influenced by their ability to find these resources and communities, resulting in a sense of obligation to “pay it forward” to those traveling the same path behind them. The desire to support trans people as well as be a source of education about trans experience to non-trans friends and family, resulted in a tension between the need to manage the risks associated with their visibility and the desire to be visible as a resource to others. The result was a custom set of heuristics and practices that each participant used to manage their visibility.

These practices included managing their audience through a variety of tools included design features such as severing the connection with someone (e.g., unfriending on Facebook), hiding

their content (e.g., unfollowing on Instagram), or blocking them entirely. However, participants frequently waited to implement these actions until a critical threshold of offensiveness that varied by participant had been crossed. They instead developed internal curation metrics for who should or should not be in their audience. For example, P08 utilized a “three strikes, you’re out” rule to determine when to use platform features to manage their relationship with an audience member:

I’ll usually just turn off the notifications for that post and I won’t see it again for that particular post ... Like one of my childhood best friends at the time ... [said] a lot of things I didn’t agree with and I was actually slightly uncomfortable as a trans person. I just blocked all of her notifications. (P08)

These internal metrics, and how they became enacted through platform features, varied greatly by participants. While P08 unfollowed the problematic individual, P15 made their policy explicit to their audience, and blocked people accordingly:

I used to, like, have a very public blocking policy: “If I block you this doesn’t mean I don’t like you. It just means I don’t want to see your posts.” (P15)

For our participants, these internal metrics of safety and how participants externalized them were ways of balancing the tension they felt as a result of their visibility. While immediately blocking someone might protect one from future risks associated with that other person (as P15 did), it also meant that they would no longer have the opportunity to be a source of information or education to that person. In P11’s case, being unfriended by someone meant they would not be able to help educate that person anymore:

I definitely had a conversation before I was out where someone unfriended me because they didn’t want to have another uninformed discussion with me. (P11)

Similarly, leaving a platform would result in one’s visibility within that platform disappearing, which effectively would reduce the risk of negative reactions to zero, as P03 discussed in reference to their close family members whom they had in their audiences in most online spaces, leading to the decision to create a Finsta with a tightly curated audience:

I was like, wait that sounds so nice to like not feel super stifled with what you’re gonna post... and like, I love them and like respect them but like I wouldn’t want them to see everything that’s going on in my life. (P03)

However, leaving a platform would simultaneously prevent one from being able to act reciprocally towards others or educate their broader audience on that platform.

Thus, we see our participants thinking carefully about how to best protect themselves in the event that they had a negative experience with some segment of their audience, while still maintaining access to the spaces that are important to them, as prior work has shown that online spaces are important to LGBTQ+ (e.g., [24]) and specifically trans people as they come to their identity and come out (e.g., [21, 22]).

Participants also noted that when they were forced to use audience management tools in reaction to another’s behavior, they kept those actions confined to the space in which the offense had occurred. In other words, if an audience member was being offensive in Facebook, participants would unfriend that individual on Facebook but not in other online spaces such as their Instagram(s) or Tumblr(s).

Interestingly, when participants took actions to distance themselves or reduce the visibility they had to another user, those actions were typically limited to the specific space in which infractions had occurred. This illustrates an interesting double standard when it comes to audience management: While specific people might be in several different audiences across one’s social media ecology, management actions (e.g., unfriending, unfollowing or blocking, among others) taken against an

individual were constrained to a single space; in short, audiences could cross between spaces, but audience management remained a space-specific behavior. While it was unclear during our analysis whether participants performed this partial form of audience management intentionally or not, we suspect that the most likely explanation is that people modify their relationship to specific people when and where they encounter specific offenses. However, a consequence of the partial management is that connections that persists elsewhere allowed participants to continue to be a visible resource for education to others and a peer for other trans people.

Our participants' experiences highlight a desire to provide as much benefit to their audiences and spaces, even when that created risks for them individually. Platforms had technical features that enable participants to make spaces safer for them or even prevent negative reactions entirely (for example, through leaving a space or platform altogether). However, our participants told us that they often waited until they absolutely had to take action against someone in their spaces. The consequences of those actions (such as unfriending, blocking, or leaving a space) would impact their ability to act reciprocally, greatly outweighing any personal considerations that participants had for their own safety.

Next, we discuss these findings through the theoretical lens of doors, traps, and trapdoors, and use this discussion to offer implications and suggestions for the design of social media sites.

6 DISCUSSION

Our participants made decisions about where to come out and be visible online according to the types of audiences and spaces they had created across their social media ecosystems. They used these spaces not only to further their goals and receive social support but also to provide support and education to others. Our participants used audience and content management tools across their social media presence to craft positive experiences for themselves and others. However, their experiences demonstrate a duality that visibility creates in these online spaces — as both sites of support and of struggle.

In this section, we analyze our participants' experiences through the lens of doors, traps, and trapdoors. We note where our participants' align with the original conceptualization offered by Gossett et al., also extending the theory to be applicable to experiences on social media. Building off of this analysis, we then offer implications for the theory and design before closing with suggestions for future work.

6.1 Doors

Doors are the exterior representation of a community. Imagine an individual is searching for a transgender support group or for resources related to being trans. As the individual considers which group to join, they can glimpse its community norms by reading its group-specific rules. Perhaps the topic of the group and its community rules suggest it is a group that is inclusive of their trans identity, so they decide to join or lurk [12] in order to gain access to resources. They have now stepped through the door of a new community space, and so become visible to that community (albeit to different degrees depending on their participation in the group).

The doors our participants entered occurred in many different places online, such as joining new groups in social media, adding new connections, or coming out to existing audiences. In articulating what doors existed, they simultaneously described why they decided to step through some and not others. In all cases, being visible was an important requirement for receiving support. For example, recall P07's discussion of coming out and then receiving support through positive messages and interactions with people. Support like this creates positive health outcomes similar to those observed in other work [30]. In other words, to receive support from a space required our participants to enter doors and become visible.

The decisions of our participants to pass through doors was typically only the first step. Their visibility empowered them to affect positive change in their online spaces (see Section 5.3). Acts of service included reciprocal support to others and educating people in their audiences, such as how P13 helped others by posting information, resources, or news about trans issues. In using visibility to find support and subsequently to educate others, we see participants moving through the third stage of Cavalcante’s unlearning framework and helping others “shed their thick shell of misconception” around what being trans is or looks like [9].

When participants provide support and education to others, they do more than pass through doors and become visible; they actively construct and reinforce the doors through which they passed. Once they have passed through a door, participants turned around and attempted to not only make the door accessible for peers but also alter the door by educating their audiences. If doors carry the risk of becoming traps that either force people to conform or be ostracized, then acts of service such as posts about trans issues may serve to widen or change that door to be more inclusive for others or create trapdoors to new spaces that could be more accepting.

Being able to act in the service of others was often an active consideration when considering a door and the visibility the door would create. Participants described receiving similar help while they came to their identity, and so felt that being a person of support or an educator was an important part of passing through the door and becoming visible. Yet being visible often led to experiences with traps when participants did not fit the normative expectations of their audiences within a specific space. In the next section, we discuss these traps and how they manifested in our participants’ online spaces.

6.2 Traps

Doors are originally posited by Gossett et al. as being shared across society, in that once they are opened they cannot be closed again even if they end up being a trap for some. When considering the experience of individuals online, however, doors and traps are more fluid and individualized. Traps reveal themselves when groups are, or become, less inclusive than an individual initially imagined. Perhaps the group, while appearing supportive of all trans experiences, ends up privileging binary gender norms at the expense of non-binary experiences. Or similarly, a group that stresses the importance of medical interventions such as gender affirmation surgery may become a less supportive space for someone uninterested in these. Perhaps the individual’s identity evolved beyond a specific group, and they no longer feel like part of the community. This group has effectively become a trap.

It may be technically possible to close a door or remove that trap — one could delete the account that has placed them into a visible position. But this was viewed as a nuclear, last-ditch effort by our participants. Accordingly, an important part of adding a new platform to one’s social media ecology is evaluating what could be a trap within a new space in an attempt to avoid these traps. For our participants, the consideration of what might be a trap was synonymous with considering who their specific audience in that space would be, and what that audience’s expectations would be. When deciding whether or not to engage with a door to become visible on or within a certain platform, participants considered the possibility of the door being a trap and the ramifications that would follow if they engaged with the door/trap. For some participants, these considerations were directly related to their trans identity. As an example, P12 discussed not using Reddit because they felt that it was not a safe space to be visibly trans. P12 had evaluated Reddit a possible door, but one that would likely end up being a trap for them — they did not feel like they fit in with what they imagined the average user in that space to be.

However, concerns over traps were not limited to concerns about trans visibility. Our participants told us about a variety of factors that could contribute to a space becoming a trap (see Section 5.1.1).

For example, P12 also chose not to use Snapchat because they felt they were too old to engage with the generalized audience of that specific platform. Here, they evaluated a space as being a trap for them because of something other than their trans identity.

Participants made these types of decisions across all of the social media platforms they used, echoing findings in prior work [66]. Adding a new platform to one's ecosystem might upset a carefully constructed visibility, leading to negative experiences, a loss of safe spaces, or an inability to help others. In other words, one might fall into a trap.

Factors that our participants considered in deciding whether or not to be on a site were not static in nature. Instead, they described a constant evaluation as platforms were added or removed from their social media ecology and as connections to people were added or removed on various platforms. The result was online doors and traps that were equally dynamic. Not only could one remove themselves from an unsafe space, but they were also given tools that enabled them to control who was in the audience within a specific space through technical features such as unfriending, unfollowing, and blocking. Thus, the doors that participants passed through, and the visibility that resulted, were more personalized and safer.

It is clear from our participants' experiences that traps exist just as readily online as they do offline. What differs, however, is the forms they take. Because doors — and the spaces and audiences beyond them — are unique to each individual's social media presence, the ways that traps manifest are similarly unique. Likewise, how individuals mitigate or circumvent these traps are also unique — but can collectively be understood as trapdoors.

6.3 Trapdoors

For Gossett et al. [25], trapdoors offer an alternative to existing doors and traps. They present opportunities to go somewhere else. Gossett et al. ultimately use trapdoors as a rhetorical device — a reframing of doors and traps to offer the possibility of a different way, a different reality, and a call to dream of what they acknowledge might be impossible: a way out. Yet in extending Gossett et al.'s work to social computing, we contend that trapdoors can tangibly exist in online spaces. We see trapdoors in the workarounds that people deploy and the features that technologists might build.

Our participants had not had any significant negative experiences as a result of their visibility online. However, the perception that they would someday was pervasive. Our participants described practices to reconstruct spaces in order to mitigate the chances of or to cope with falling into traps. In other words, they were laying the groundwork for trapdoors to new spaces that offered opportunities to escape from these forecasted negative experiences, if and when they occurred.

In the experiences our participants told us about, we see them building trapdoors in two ways: (1) through interpersonal actions, and (2) by utilizing the technical features and affordances of specific platforms. Interpersonal actions frequently took the form of coming out to trusted others, like parents, prior to larger more-public disclosures (e.g., a coming out post on Facebook).

As reported in section 5.2, people came out to trusted individuals or smaller groups of people before coming out more widely because they expressed these relationships were deeper, imbued with more shared history and trust. These smaller disclosures could occur online or in-person. Regardless, coming out to these trusted few also allowed them to support the person when that individual came out in larger, more public settings, like when coming out to an entire Facebook network. For example, disclosing to parents individually, instead of as part of a larger disclosure, can be important for acknowledging the importance of the relationship, but also for more practical reasons like continuing to have a safe place to sleep.

Thus, participants came out in smaller spaces, where the audiences of those spaces were very close or influential individuals, before making larger, public disclosures. Recall, for example, P09's

experience coming out to family members individually through private message or in-person disclosures before making a larger, public coming out post on Facebook. Close, privileged disclosures such as P09's were not limited only to family. Allowing other audience members to see that the person who is coming out has the public support of others could contribute to the creation of online spaces that would ultimately be safe for the person coming out — thus creating trapdoors into spaces that are less likely to be traps.

The second type of interpersonal action that our participants discussed focused not on themselves, but on their audiences. They described efforts focused on educating others about trans-related issues or experiences with the goal of increasing awareness and making spaces safer for others and possibly themselves. Educating others constitutes another way of creating trapdoors to escape traps. Education actions can create trapdoors within existing communities by convincing the audience of that space to be more welcoming and supportive. Education actions can also create trapdoors by alerting others of a new space that is potentially more welcoming than the one they are currently in (e.g., a post might include a pointer to a community that would otherwise be unknown to that audience member).

Regardless of what form they took, reciprocal actions were important in acknowledging the support one had received from others while coming out and “paying it forward” by attempting to support others as they came out. Interpersonal actions were performed by an individual in interaction with their audiences. In contrast, technical labor involved using system affordances unfriending, blocking, or audience management like filtering. As examples, we previously discussed P10's use of unfriending on Facebook or P03's use of a highly private Instagram (a *Finsta*) to limit their audience were both common practices across our participants.

We saw the use of technical features to manage audiences and curate safe spaces as mitigating traps that already existed and constructing trapdoors to spaces that were not yet known to be (or not be) traps. When considering a space that may lead to negative experiences (a trap), participants made use of technical features to construct trapdoors in order to avoid falling into these traps. For example, when faced with a family member on Facebook who is bigoted towards the LGBTQ community, it could be ineffective to attempt socially motivated actions such as those discussed above — it is unlikely they would be effective. It would also be a social faux pas to sever the connection on Facebook with the family member through features such as unfriending or blocking. Instead, one might use a feature such as filtering lists to ensure that family member only sees content that they would deem uncontroversial, thus circumventing the specific kind of trap that this family member might present while still being present in the space and maintaining social capital with the social network of people that surround the relationship with that family member.

Conversely, participants also used technical features to construct doors that would avoid becoming traps for them (as discussed in section 5.4). These types of technical actions made use of tools and features focused on preserving user privacy and giving the user control over their audience composition. For example, P03's creation of a *Finsta* made use of the private account feature on Instagram — the content on their *Finsta* could only be seen by someone if P03 allowed them to see it (by accepting their follow request) and therefore P03 kept the audience small and avoided the trap that a larger Instagram audience could be. Through the use of this feature, P03 constructed a space where they could be certain of who was following them and seeing their content. The level of control over their audience that the feature gave P03 allowed them to post without fear of experiencing a negative audience reaction to a post, making the *Finsta* a safe trapdoor through which they could enact their lived identity without the possibility of stigma. Returning to the example of a bigoted family member, the use of technical features like in P03's case created a space that a bigoted family member simply would not have access to, like locking a door and only giving the key to certain trusted connections.

With socially based actions, like targeted coming outs, and actions that made use of technical features such as filter lists or privacy settings, we found participants describing actions that served as the reconstruction of doors and the creation of trapdoors to spaces that would ultimately serve as positive spaces to inhabit and interact with audiences that would be supportive. No matter how they decided to construct these spaces, we observed participants thinking carefully about who the audience was or would be, and tailoring their decisions about what practices to use according to those perceptions, and as a result building trapdoors into spaces that seemed safer.

6.4 Implications for Design

The design of social media platforms is inevitably one of constructing doors and traps. While they may be unavoidable sides of the same coin, we see opportunities for platform designers to engage with this metaphor when designing for online communities for whom visibility is a central concern. In this section, building on the analysis of our interview data, we discuss the opportunities we see with this metaphor at both a conceptual and practical level. Practically, it gives them an opportunity to actively work towards remedying these inequities when they occur through the design of features that offer alternatives to places where those inequities do not exist, nor may ever exist. Conceptually, the lens offers designers the chance to acknowledge the inherent inequities that inevitably become part of their systems, even when designers create with the best of intentions.

Practically, we would encourage designers to carefully consider what could become traps within their systems before those traps have the chance to ensnare people. While anticipating specific traps might be an exercise in speculation, across our data we saw the importance of agency within online platforms, as when our participants discussed using features to enact implicit rules as part of managing their audiences. Through this lens we also see ways that supporting reappropriation can enable people to create trapdoors within these designs, thereby promoting inclusivity by allowing users to adapt the designs to their unique needs.

Alternatively, designers could instead playfully turn to the physical metaphor offered by doors, traps, and trapdoors. Both Gossett et al.'s original conceptualization and our extension of doors fail to account for locks that control when doors open and how they open. Here, we see two possibilities that might offer potential avenues for design.

First, there are scenarios in which visibility cannot be rescinded, even online. For example, our participants often came out last on Facebook, because it represented their largest number of offline connections. In this case, one probably can not pass back through the door (for example, by deleting the entire account). Indeed, our participants took great care in deciding where and when to come out online. The care they took suggests that some doors are not as easily traversed as others. Gossett et al. helps us see that some visibilities cannot be undone, no matter what we design. Thus, designers should consider how to help mitigate the consequences of coming out in a space where that visibility cannot be rescinded — spaces where the door locks behind you. For example, designers could explore features that enable individuals to more easily segment their audiences based on relational or geographic closeness. In situations where it may be unsafe to be visibly out to individuals that you see on a daily basis, providing more granular filtering controls like these could help individuals avoid inadvertently disclosing their identity to individuals who will not be supportive or where repercussions may extend into offline spaces.

Second, a door may be locked from the onset. Locked doors can happen when one feels that they share the identity and experiences of a community, but the community itself will not allow them to join. In a platform like Facebook where groups can require individuals to answer questions or be approved by moderators/admins (or both), one may not be allowed to join a community's group or page. For example, one might appear "too feminine" based on profile photos to be allowed to join an FTM group on Facebook. To remedy this, designers could instead offer suggestions for other

groups or pages to join in the wake of a rejected application to join a group. Not only would this act as another form of a trapdoor, but indeed it could be the key to joining the original group – someone in the recommended group might be able to help in the process of joining the original group.

Despite how productive these suggestions may be, it is important to acknowledge that this lens highlights a challenge for designers that arises due to the nature of doors and traps. While identifying problems and proposing design solutions is a foundational cornerstone of our field, Gossett et al. would argue that the issues created when doors become traps are not ever completely solvable. We are inclined to agree. It is impossible to design an online system that, even as it provides access to some, is not at some point also a trap for others. Nevertheless, even as we acknowledge the impossibility of solving every trap, it is incumbent on designers to continue to strive towards that impossibility. Just as Bassichis, Lee, and Spade argue that “impossibility may very well be our only possibility” for trans and non-binary justice [3], we argue that impossibility is the only possibility for designers of online systems as well. To strive for anything less would be unconscionable given the experiences of the individuals using these systems.

6.5 Future Work

The work of designers does not stop at the suggestions in the previous section. As made clear, the issues posed by doors and traps as it relates to visibility are not solvable. To motivate future work, in this section we offer several possible avenues for researchers to explore to further extend the work presented in this paper.

First, future work should further consider experiences of direct harm and their relationship to the doors and traps that visibility presents. Our participants noted that they did not have many experiences of direct harm (i.e., actualized stigma). In this sense, they felt fortunate. However, future work should address this limitation of our participants’ experiences and study how visibility can lead to direct harm. This is particularly important for people with multiple marginalized identities – for example, the experiences of a more diverse group of participants will likely contain more instances of direct harm.

Second, future work may find it fruitful to consider the connections between critical lenses such as Gossett et al.’s approach to visibility and feminist and intersectional approaches that have been productively adopted in the CSCW community (e.g., [23, 65]. Gossett et al. are explicit in their claim that doors can move society forward, but they do so by privileging some and presenting traps for others. Connecting this perspective to, for example, as intersectional analyses could highlight the nuanced ways that doors and opportunities presented to a community are differently experienced by members of those communities.

Finally, we see clear opportunities for future work to further extend the metaphor of doors, traps, and trapdoors within and to other online spaces. Everyday, online people evaluate and try on a space before adopting it – effectively evaluating a door before entering, as if using a window to view the space beyond. We are left wondering, however, what they are unable to see. What are the unexpected consequences of what is left opaque? Particularly when stepping through a door presents risks, future research should further consider how to let people see the spaces they are entering, including the traps that may lay in wait.

7 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we investigated the experiences trans social media users had while coming out across their social media ecologies. We found that users make careful decisions about how and when to come out and be visible online and often make these decisions in support of goals around finding community support and information. Turning to the conceptual lens of doors, traps, and

trapdoors originally posited by Gossett et al., we saw users carefully considering what doors to pass through, dealing with traps as they arose, and creating trapdoors to new spaces and possibilities as a means of evading traps. The work presented here highlights that while we can design solutions for specific traps, these solutions will inevitably create more doors and more traps for people to fall into. Thus, this work contributes an understanding that instead of focusing our efforts on finding an end-all-be-all solution to the problems of visibility, we should instead focus on designing ways for people to more quickly recognize traps and find ways of mitigating or evading them through trapdoors. While we may never create a fully inclusive space online, we can design our systems to encourage people to engage with the spaces contained within and provide them with the tools to find new, more supportive spaces when the spaces they previously inhabited online fail to adequately give them what they need.

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