

The Reception of Transgender Women in Online Women-Loving-Women Spaces

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**ABSTRACT**

This work explores the reception of transgender women in online spaces made by and for women-loving-women. The complicated and often transmisogynistic dynamics between transgender and cisgender women-loving-women have been well-documented, and there are many studies on the importance of online communities, especially for queer individuals; however, very little research has been done to bridge the gap between these two topics. For this study, 15 transgender women-loving-women who have been members of the Subreddit [r/actuallesbians](#) for at least six months were interviewed about their experience in the community and on Reddit in general in regards to their identity. Results indicated that transgender women are for the most part welcomed in [r/actuallesbians](#) specifically; though, their reception varies widely between Subreddits for queer women. Additionally, cisnormativity plagues even the most welcoming of communities for queer women.

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## Introduction

In 2019, the Subreddit “r/actuallesbians” went private after a brigading effort. It started with a Reddit user complaining in another Subreddit called “r/trueoffmychest” that they feel r/actuallesbians turned its back on cisgender lesbians by accepting transgender women. This post kicked off a brigade, an invasion of users from outside r/actuallesbians who flooded the online community with adamantly anti-transgender posts and bombarded transgender-positive content with downvotes and transphobic comments to harass users. The moderating team of r/actuallesbians was overwhelmed and had to make the community private for a short while to stop the harassment. To prevent further attacks, the team recruited more moderators and called on users to report any transphobic harassment on the Subreddit (Puente 2019).

This is just one instance of transphobic harassment on Reddit<sup>1</sup>, but it demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining a healthy and trans-positive online community for women who love women. Though this brigade forced the moderators to shut down the Subreddit, the moderating team and the community came back stronger and set up a better system for dealing with future harassment. Online queer communities like r/actuallesbians that defend its transgender members are crucial to providing transgender users with a safe space among women-loving-women, something that has been difficult to achieve within the community in the past decades.

This research explores the reception of transgender women in online spaces made by and for women-loving-women. While past research focuses on transgender women in offline spaces for women-loving-women and the importance of online communities for people who identify as

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<sup>1</sup> Reddit is a social media platform made up of many communities resembling internet forums. Users can post content, and others can vote up, vote down, or leave comments on the post. For more details, please refer to the glossary in the appendix.

LGBT+, very little research has been done to synthesize these two topics. Online environments differ greatly from offline ones, as they can provide greater anonymity and take away the physical barriers that prevent some people from finding a welcoming community. The research question for my thesis is the following: How are transgender women received in online spaces made by and for women who love women?

According to the available literature, the relationship between transgender and cisgender women-loving-women has historically been complicated. It is important to note that women's issues and especially queer women's issues have been posed as oppositional in an attempt to depict transgender women as oppressors rather than recognize that all women—transgender, gay, or otherwise—struggle together against the same patriarchy. Truly, cisgender WLW (women-loving-women) have not exhibited the most amount of hatred against transgender women, but the tension between the groups gain a lot of scrutiny because they are an example of lateral violence: two oppressed groups pit against each other (Stone 2009; Beemyn 2015; Gailey and Brown 2015; Toone 2018). However, transphobia and cisnormativity are very much present in WLW communities, and the little attention that online versions of these spaces have been given necessitates research into them.

For decades, the lesbian identity has been reserved for bodies that are assigned female at birth, with no regard to the transgender identity. Additionally, the exclusive attraction to that same body was branded a sign of loyalty to the lesbian community, considering everyone else as an outsider or less queer than the rest (Boyd 1999; Rudy 2001; Coogan 2006). With such a strict and essentialist mindset of the identity, being attracted to women was not only a status but a standard to hold others against, completely invalidating anyone who did not exclusively fit into such expectations. Normalizing a rigid and body-specific standard to the lesbian identity made

the WLW community an easy place for transphobia to propagate. It is no wonder, then, that WLW spaces like lesbian music festivals got away with enforcing womyn-born-womyn policies, which excluded transgender women from entering and participating (Morris 2005; McDonald 2006; Vasquez 2014; Beemyn and Eliason 2015). Similar policies are present in some online WLW Subreddits, where transgender women are excluded, and if they are allowed, they are tolerated as long as they do not discuss being transgender. Silencing them simulates an entirely cisgender space, so it is hardly an improvement from outright exclusion.

Still, there are successful trans-inclusive queer and WLW spaces both online and offline. That success lies in two main aspects: rethinking the lesbian identity through cultural affinity rather than biological commonality and using intergroup contact in an environment that values input from transgender members (Travers and Deri 2010; Walch, Sinkannen, Swain, Francisco, Breaux, and Sjoberg 2012; Case and Stewart 2013). First, cultural affinity is different from the idea of the lesbian consciousness because culture in this sense is based off of circumstances experienced together by transgender and cisgender WLW. The women build culture off and with each other rather than defining it first and reserving it only for those who fit into the cisnormative definition of a lesbian. Subreddits, regardless of size, develop their own culture over time through the interactions of users and the regulations enforced by moderators (Seering, Wang, Yoon, and Kaufman 2019; Squirrel 2019). Through a combination of both, an online WLW space can be welcoming, exclusionary, or somewhere in between.

Secondly, input from transgender members must be valued and platformed in a WLW space. Because community members hold power over the content popularized in Subreddits, it is up to them to work with moderators and create a welcoming space that gives contributions from transgender women as much visibility as that of cisgender members. However, even welcoming

spaces like r/actuallesbians exhibit cisnormativity, mainly through perpetuating the concept that cisgender women were socialized to experience a consciousness exclusive to them, which has been argued in the past offline spaces as well (Rudy 2001; Vasquez 2014).

Members of r/actuallesbians are an appropriate population through which to answer the research question because of its popularity and its commitment to fighting transphobia. While other WLW Subreddits exist, some of them are exclusionary or are hostile toward transgender women. The members and moderators of such Subreddits cannot keep transgender women from visiting the online spaces and interacting without making them private. However, the prevalent transphobic posts that make up the Subreddits effectively keep transgender women from interacting, as they are guaranteed to be immediately banned or harassed by members. Thus, hostile Subreddits rarely have interactions involving transgender women, and the very few instances of interaction are negative.

Other WLW subreddits that are trans-inclusive exist, but they are smaller and focus on particular topics (for example, “r/LesbianGamers” offers discussions of videogames from a lesbian perspective), which limits the amount of discussion about the women-loving-women communities and how different people experience the Subreddit. The same specificity was found in two studies that investigated transgender women in online WLW Spaces, which focused on a queer mom group and fan fiction forums respectively (Lev, Dean, DeFilippis, Evernham, McLaughlin, and Phillips 2008; Walker 2009). Looking at a more general community like r/actuallesbians expands the topics of discussion that transgender women engage in. The culture of r/actuallesbians is not impacted by one specific theme that the community centers around the way niche communities are and instead changes based on what topics are discussed.

However, even welcoming spaces like r/actuallesbians exhibit cisnormativity, mainly through perpetuating the idea that cisgender women were socialized to experience a consciousness exclusive to them, which has been argued in past offline spaces as well (Rudy 2001; Vasquez 2014). The association between sexuality and body continue in the lesbian community today through jokes and discussions that emphasize attraction to a body assigned female at birth. Such discussions have seemingly become inseparable from the WLW community, and it is thus assumed that anyone who inhabits a women-loving-women space is a cisgender woman with a specific kind of body. Even in a women-loving-women Subreddit, which rarely contains users who have pictures of themselves, a member's physical body is assumed to be that of a cisgender woman, which keeps the transgender experience separate and additional to the women-loving-women experience rather than an expected integral part of it.

Despite the problem of cisnormativity, r/actuallesbians is generally considered a safe space for transgender women on Reddit. Most Subreddits exhibit casual transphobia, and some queer Subreddits can be just as brutal, leaving transgender users with very few safe spaces outside of transgender-focused communities. While cisnormativity is prevalent in r/actuallesbians, the community still provides a fair example of how an online public space for women-loving-women can welcome transgender women to participate and have their share of a safe space.

Researching the reception of transgender women in online spaces for women-loving-women is important because of how integral these communities are for queer people. Individuals who identify as LGBT+ tend to use online social networks more than non-queer individuals do (Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, Pettaway 2014). Finding community and resources offline can be dangerous and even impossible depending on the area,



so online communities offer a more accessible way for people all over the world to learn and discover their identities with others. Additionally, online spaces give queer individuals more power over the content they interact with, since users can practice boundary maintenance through the different communities they choose to join: if one is exclusionary or hostile, they can simply join another (Cannon, Speedlin, Avera, Robertson, Ingram, and Prado 2017). With how much people rely on technology, it is safe to say that online spaces have become an integral part of making the LGBT+ community more accessible to those who wish to take part in it. With the history of the WLW community's treatment of transgender women in offline spaces, it is important to understand how the attributes of an online space—such as anonymity and the ability to engage and disengage conversations with a wide audience—affect current interactions between cisgender and transgender members. Given that I only found two sources exploring the reception of transgender women in online WLW spaces, it is clear that this topic is largely unexplored. This study bridges the gap in the knowledge between the reception of transgender women in offline WLW spaces and what makes online spaces so important to the LGBT+ community.

For this study, 15 transgender women who have been members of the Reddit community *r/actuallesbians* for at least six months participated in semi-structured interviews. The interviews focused on their experiences within the Subreddit and Reddit in general regarding their identities as transgender women-loving-women. All interviews were remotely conducted and were either text-based or audio-based. Transcripts of these interviews were analyzed using ATLAS.ti. Tenets of grounded theory were used to guide the analysis. I coded all transcripts without predetermining any specific themes to look for. Throughout the analytical process, interview codes were grouped into topics of harassment, cisnormativity, support, transgender women's

reactions to transphobia, participants' traits in their lives that may affect how they view their experience in WLW communities, and an evaluation of online versus offline queer spaces. I also utilized the program's memo function to think about these themes in a broader and more conceptual way.

Most participants felt that they were received positively in r/actuallesbians. The community's population of transgender women are routinely targeted—almost always by non-members, according to participants. Yet, they feel welcomed because of the community's proactive response to transphobia and the overall trans-positivity of most posts. However, one of the biggest issues in r/actuallesbians and all Subreddits that are not trans-specific is the ubiquitous cisnormativity. Mostly, cisnormativity is perpetuated through humor concerning how a WLW's body should look and the kind of bodies she should be attracted to.

In this thesis, I will review the relevant literature on the topic of transgender women in online WLW spaces. I also discuss the trend of using a cisgender AFAB (assigned female at birth) body to define womanhood and the lesbian identity, excluding not only transgender women but also those who do not fit into the supposed consciousness propagated by white, cisgender, middle-class lesbians. The exclusionary framing of the woman and lesbian identities continued in offline WLW spaces that were trans-exclusionary. WLW spaces also kept issues that were not strictly about the oppression of lesbians at the sidelines, refusing to take in the different experiences of women that identified with other minority groups. Current queer and WLW groups exist both offline and online and are becoming more open to different identities and sexualities. However, offline spaces can still be difficult for queer individuals to access, which is why online spaces are so commonly used. After going through the literature, I discuss the process of conducting semi-structured interviews remotely and the process of analyzing the data

in ATLAS.ti. Finally, I present the results and simultaneously discuss the implications their patterns present, including how they relate back to the literature. My hope is that this study will promote further research on this topic.

## Literature Review

With the increased visibility of different queer communities in recent years, it seems as if the trend of radical feminists and WLW being at the forefront of expressing transphobic thoughts has increased. It should be noted, however, that this brand of transphobia that pits women's issues against transgender issues as if they are mutually exclusive does not reflect the actual demographic of transphobia. In fact, WLW are less likely than gay men to oppose transgender inclusion because of their familiarity with being the minority in queer power dynamics (Stone 2009). The reason that feminists and WLW get more attention when being transphobic is because of this bigotry's status as lateral violence between two oppressed groups in the patriarchal society, thus making this popular form of border wars seem like a phenomenon (Beemyn and Eliason 2015; Gailey and Brown 2015; Toone 2018). The relationship between transgender and cisgender feminists and WLW is far more complicated than what figures such as J.K. Rowling or Lily Cade<sup>2</sup> make it out to be when they accuse transgender women of being a threat to cisgender women. Despite the continuation of trans-exclusion in the WLW community, different spaces have made efforts to make themselves more welcoming to transgender women.

It is pertinent to understand how these relations are impacted when they take place in an online environment rather than an offline one. Past research suggests that queer youth use social media more than their non-queer counterparts, and online spaces allow a form for queer individuals to explore and express their identities in ways that are not always physically acceptable where they live. Online spaces hold great potential to further give transgender WLW a platform in the larger lesbian community.

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<sup>2</sup> J.K. Rowling and Lily Cade are two well-known trans-exclusionary feminist activists who publicly speak out against transgender women being welcomed in women's spaces, often implying that they are pose a physical threat to cisgender women.

## THE BORDERS OF THE LESBIAN COMMUNITY

Around the mid 1970s, radical feminism turned from engaging the patriarchy head on to avoiding it through lesbian separatism (Rudy 2001). During this time, women-only communities formed in Durham, North Carolina and other areas in the Southeastern United States. In addition to political motivations, a lot of lesbian women were also incentivized to create their own communities, as they felt sidelined by both the gay liberation movement and the women liberation movement, othered in both regards because of their intersecting identities (Cooper and Trebra 2006). These communities provided a form of refuge, in which the lesbian identity was praised as being the epitome of feminism, since it was a means of building a woman-only utopia. There was a sense of unity among the women in lesbian separatist communities, a belief that all women experience a certain female consciousness (Rudy 2001; McConnell, Odahl-Ruan, Kozlowski, Shattell, and Todd 2015; Enszer 2016).

However, that sense of unity was only the vision of a specific type of radical feminist lesbian, as the politics of such a community were based on an essentialist definition of womanhood, meaning that there were innate and universal traits and experiences of being a woman (McConnell et al. 2015). The strongest fracture in this idea of unity was brought up by Black lesbian women and other lesbian women of color, as they disagreed with the concept of swearing allegiance to a community solely centered around women while setting aside other social issues, such as racism (Rudy 2001; Cooper and Trebra 2008). Lesbians of color brought to light how the idealized factors that were deemed “essential” to womanness were limited to privileged women and saw other social issues as a distraction to the liberation of the (white, middle-class) lesbian woman. Essentialist ideology also placed the body and desires of women as

signs of loyalty over their actual words and actions (Rudy 2001). The idolized values were thus limiting and excluded transgender women for not having the correct type of body, regardless of whether they transitioned. After all, it was under the lesbian separatist ideal of “work only with women” through which Janice Raymond justified outing Sandy Stone, a transgender woman, who was working for the woman-exclusive record company Olivia Records (Enszer 2016). But it is also how the body is expressed that comes under intense scrutiny. Many lesbian women were skeptical of radical feminist ideals. The ideals not only sought to remove maleness from their culture but also butchness and the butch-femme lesbian aesthetic, because it supposedly reinforced heteronormativity from a radical feminist perspective (Rudy 2001; Green 2006; Stone 2009).

Perhaps the most notable harm of the lesbian separatist mindset in relation to this study is its lasting effects on bisexual women in the queer women community. Decades later, there is still tension between bisexual women and lesbian women. Given that the body and its desires were a form of loyalty in the community, bisexual women are still often labeled as ‘traitors’ to the movement of lesbian liberation (Hartman 2006; Mclean 2008). There still exists a false notion that bisexual women’s attraction to men give them a sense of privilege in a heteronormative society that lesbian women lack. In reality, bisexual women face discrimination from the larger heteronormative society and from the homonormative society because of the way they disrupt the dominant sexual binary (Ault 1996; Welzer-Lang 2008). The misconception of having privilege despite holding a contentious identity that challenges social norms is similar to the accusations transgender women face for their supposed male privilege (McConnell et al. 2015; Tate and Pearson 2015). Indeed, bisexual politics are often believed to threaten the visibility of

committed lesbian feminism, and bisexual activists are deemed infiltrators of queer political spaces (McLean 2008 and Welzer-Lang 2008).

To avoid conflict and keep their spot in the queer community, bisexual women sometimes represent themselves as lesbians or “dykes” to assimilate. Through this, they avoid stigma in a community that already questions the validity of bisexuality as a queer identity and see it as a step in transitioning to either straight or gay (Ault 1996; Hartman 2006; McLean 2008; and Welzer-Lang 2008). The accusation that bisexual politics interferes with gay and lesbian issues and causes a split in the movement is echoed in the transphobic argument put forward by Janice Raymond and other trans-exclusionists that transgender women split the feminist movement (Stone 1992; Stryker 2013; Gailey and Brown 2015). In both cases, the minority within the oppressed group of lesbian women are accused of breaking the movement apart whenever the majority want to reserve liberation for only the most privileged queer women.

I describe the effects of radical feminism’s and lesbian separatism’s essentialist ideals of womanhood to explain the foundation of transphobia as it pertains to women’s spaces, particularly queer women’s spaces. Lesbian separatism was not born out of a desire to create tension but rather to avoid it altogether. Even before lesbian separatism, feminism was lesbian-exclusionary, deeming queer women to be a threat to the feminist movement (Stone 2009). Those who still wish to defend lesbian separatism want its historical contributions to be valued, and they fear that the work of lesbian women in the 1970s and 1980s will be forgotten or demonized in the current movement toward trans-inclusivity (Beemyn and Eliason 2015; Enszer 2016). However, the desire to preserve and admire progress of past lesbian women should balance itself with the recurring renegotiation of boundaries and binaries. It is the failure to acknowledge the way that white, middle-class lesbian women can be both oppressed and

oppressors, rather than the recognition of intersecting identities, that has fractured feminist and lesbian communities in the past.

Jack Halberstam used Gayle Rubin's concept of the "border wars"—the contentious boundaries caused by the tension between sexual minorities forming communities and the forces that prevent them from that goal—to describe the infighting between butch lesbians and transgender men (Halberstam 1998). The "border wars" concept is also useful for understanding the struggles of bisexual women, butches, femmes, and WLW of color within the broader WLW community. Halberstam's use of the term has since been adapted to describe the tension between cisgender WLW and transgender WLW. It is important to keep in mind that transgender women are not the first to be caught in the "border wars." They are not threatening the spaces of cisgender WLW in their fight for inclusion—neither were women of color, bisexual women, butches, or femmes.

## GROWING PAINS FOR LESBIAN AND TRANSGENDER IDENTITIES

A significant part of discourse around transgender women starts with the way people understand gender. Cisnormativity and heteronormativity both perpetuate an essentialist understanding of gender, in which gender is strictly tied to sex in a binary system of male and female that is not to be challenged (Nagoshi, Hohn, and Nagoshi 2017). The cisnormative view of gender even constitutes earlier transgender discourse written by transgender writers (Stone 1992; Cooper and Trebra 2006; Gailey and Brown 2015). Thus, it is no surprise that essentialism also grounded the lesbian identity to a body that is assigned female at birth (Boyd 1999; Rudy 2001; Coogan 2006; Robinson 2006; Walker 2009).



Tying gender identity, specifically the woman identity, to the body manifested itself in trans-exclusionary policies of offline lesbian events. The most emblematic example of this is Michfest's womyn-born-womyn policy. The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, or Michfest, was an annual music festival that started in 1976 and ran until 2015. In the 1970s, attending lesbian festivals like Michfest were a rite of passage, and the festivals were considered political spaces (Morris 2005). However, transgender women were excluded from this tradition for decades, as popular music festivals like Michfest, Lesbian Space Project, and Australian LesFest only allowed people assigned female at birth (Morris 2005; McDonald 2006; Robinson 2006; Vasquez 2014; Beemyn and Eliason 2015; McConnell et al. 2015). Controversy grew from the policy, leading former attendees and popular artists to boycott Michfest. The organizers of the festival posed the exclusionary rule as a request that transgender women keep it as a space for cisgender women only out of respect for the conversations of girlhood and cisgender women's bodies (Vasquez 2014). However, the festival gladly accepted transgender men among its attendees, even though they too do not fit into the "womyn-born-womyn" policy (McConnell et al. 2015). This was not an issue of keeping the focus on cisgender women but rather refusing to accept transgender identities as valid. Rather than rethink the policy or even communicate with transgender women, Michfest resisted calls for trans-inclusion from the WLW community at large and no longer had the money to continue by 2015 (Beemyn and Eliason 2015). According to Michfest, transgender women did not belong because their presence could supposedly traumatize attendees and because of the belief that they benefited from male privilege (McConnell et al. 2015). The mindset of essentialism is often used to invalidate transgender identities altogether by refusing to accept transgender women as women and tying transgender men to "womanhood." Both are judgements on the basis of their bodies.

The argument of essentialism was eventually viewed as outdated and inaccurate, by which point the transgender identity itself was viewed as essentialist. The original fear of the transgender identity was that it challenged the essentialist gender binary, and it was “too queer” (Travers and Deri 2010; Weiss 2011; Rossiter 2015; Nagoshi et al. 2017). But there came a change with Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire*, in which she argued that transgender women view womanhood in an essentialist fashion because they change their bodies and use femininity to live their gender and divide the feminist community as “male infiltrators” (Stone 1992; Jeffreys 1997; Green 2006; Withers 2010; Richardson 2013; Stryker 2013; Vasquez 2014; Gailey and Brown 2015). The inclusion of transgender women would supposedly taint the image of the feminist movement, an idea which plays into the concept of respectability politics. The movement was wary of not challenging systems of oppression too much, as it could supposedly endanger the goal of slow and easy progress (Toone 2018). Even though the attack on masculine and feminine expressions in the lesbian separatist movement had been challenged at this point, transgender women’s gender expressions were policed in the same way and were cited as a reason to invalidate their identity. Not only were they attacked for being too feminine compared to cisgender women, but also for not being feminine enough, as butch trans lesbians came under fire as well (Beemyn and Eliason 2015; Rossiter 2015).

This turn brought about a dangerous era for transgender women in the lesbian community. Janice Raymond’s work outed a woman as transgender and justified lessening support for transgender women to the Reagan administration. She also put forth the idea that transgender women are a threat to cisgender women and that their transition is a form of rape because they “appropriate” a woman’s body (Stone 1992; Stryker 2013; Vasquez 2014; Enszer 2016). This era popularized the notion of transgender women as dangerous and took a lot of

resources and opportunities for community-building from transgender women. This turn, however, does not mean that the weaponization of essentialism against the transgender identity has entirely died out. Transgender women are caught in a paradox of being at once too radical but not radical enough, both of which deny them access to women's spaces.

Although transphobic views continue into the present day, there are new discussions in how we understand not only gender identity but the lesbian identity itself. There is better recognition now of the restrictive nature of viewing transgender and lesbian identities as oppositional (Richardson 2013). Transgender identities have brought about doubts against the idea of a unified gender experience. For instance, transgender men's autobiographies show the vastly different ways people assigned female at birth experience gender socialization growing up (Tate and Pearson 2015). Units on the experiences of transgender women are being taught in some women's studies classes, with ongoing discussions about the best way to teach these experiences (Cooper and Trebra 2006). Over time, a platform for transgender women in feminist and queer women's spaces has been built up to include them in the movement toward liberation.

Rethinking the lesbian identity is now going beyond the inclusion of transgender women to include anyone who can self-identify as a woman or non-binary individual feeling attraction toward other women or non-binary individuals (Tate 2012). This flexible definition of lesbian would also include bisexual, pansexual, and other women who are not exclusively attracted to women as well as transgender men, but only if they choose to identify themselves as such. Self-definition provides a more accessible way for individuals of different experiences to find commonalities between each other. One example of finding commonality is seen in the bonds formed between cisgender lesbians and transgender lesbians, who understand their bodies and sexualities to be unintelligible and often invisible in the eyes of the patriarchy until recently

(Lamble 2009). Another form of similarity lies in the way that both cisgender and transgender lesbians seek community to protect themselves from the patriarchy, even if they have been impacted differently by it. Redefining the lesbian identity by thinking of cultural affinity rather than biological commonality as the common thread among members has proven to be a successful strategy for trans-acceptance (Travers and Deri 2010). Such an approach focuses on the inclusion of different experiences among lesbians rather than building borders to exclude people.

The biggest obstacle in transgender inclusion within lesbian spaces currently is forming an adequate space for positive interactions between cisgender and transgender lesbian individuals. A truly inclusive space must be one that goes beyond theoretically supporting transgender individuals and tolerating their input. Educational and recreational spaces for women and/or lesbians that managed positive spaces negotiated their changing community boundaries through discourse with actual transgender members, valuing their input. Those that were less successful refused to give transgender voices an equal platform (Cooper and Trebra 2006; Lev et al. 2008; Walker 2009; Travers and Deri 2010). The impact of platforming transgender individuals within these spaces echoes the idea that better education of transgender issues is not enough to resolve community tensions based on power relations created by cisnormativity (Weiss 2011). Two studies indicate that exposing people to transgender representation and narratives is helpful for debunking harmful myths, but actual intergroup contact in the appropriate environment has better potential to improve discriminatory behaviors (Walch et al. 2012; Case and Stewart 2013).

Trans-inclusive communities do more than educate cisgender members on transgender issues: they provide an environment that allows for transgender perspectives to be a significant

and equal part of the lesbian discourse and the culture of the community itself. Participation from transgender members requires that they are not merely talked about but allowed to be active in the community. Online communities allow participation with fewer boundaries. Yet, understanding the impact of online factors on these communities as well as its transgender and cisgender members is necessary to maintain positive environments for this contact to be progressive.

### THE ONLINE EVOLUTION OF QUEER SPACES

Communities are necessary resources for queer education and identity expression, but their availability can be limited. Because queer folks are not always able to find these communities offline, they rely on online spaces to make these connections and tend to use online social networks more than non-queer individuals do (Craig et al. 2014; McInroy, McCloskey, Craig, and Eaton 2019). Transgender people of color can especially have difficulty finding a proper community, as the few transgender communities available to them will often be predominantly white (Singh 2012; Stone 2020). Predominantly white groups often fail to recognize race as a component of their unique queer experience. Online communities for LGBT+ individuals provide access to online models of inspiration, an avenue for expressing and exploring oneself in a more authentic way than offline, information about transition and other transgender healthcare topics, and connections to a community that may otherwise be unavailable in their life situations (Singh 2012; Fink and Miller 2014; Cannon 2017; Ingram, Speedlin, Cannon, Prado, and Avera 2017; Herrera 2018; Haimson, Dame-Griff, Capello, Richter 2021; West, Wada, and Strong 2021).

A limiting factor of offline spaces is that it can be difficult to hide engagement in a queer community. Online communities on platforms that normalize anonymity, such as Reddit and Tumblr, give queer individuals a way to safely engage with a queer community without risking their social standing in physical environments (Triggs, Møller, and Neumayer 2021). Additionally, boundary maintenance on social media is more organized since users can curate their content feed and who can view their profiles. They can also communicate with others privately and disengage at any time (Cannon et al. 2017). These advantages make online spaces not only more accessible to LGBT+ individuals but also safer. Intergroup contact between transgender WLW and cisgender WLW becomes easier, because transgender women can have access to a platform in a community, if the community is willing, while having the safe separation between their physical life and their virtual life.

There are still dangers and drawbacks to online communities, as the boundaries maintained in the community rely on the social media platform it is hosted on and the users of that platform. Social media platforms can limit connections by manipulating hashtags or, in the case of Tumblr, classifying educational transgender content as pornographic and banning it (Gerrard, Thornham, Dyer, and Sujon 2020; Haimson 2021). Social media sites are companies with aims to make a profit, and attempts to make sites more “advertiser-friendly” usually line up marginalized identities as the first to be sacrificed for the sake of public image. Therefore, while social media sites offer safer and more accessible communities to LGBT+ individuals, the access to those communities can be easily taken away if it is profitable to eliminate them. Additionally, online spaces are not free of discrimination from other users. Although LGBT+ users on a site can maintain boundaries by curating their space, these boundaries often require some experience of cyberbullying or online harassment to be set up (Cannon 2017).

For instance, transphobic users cannot be blocked from private messaging someone without first making the attempt to contact their target, at which point the target can recognize the message as harassment and block the user. Another challenge is that setting up queer community in social media sites often requires using identifiers like a “#lesbian” hashtag or another specific community name that labels users of that community with a certain identity that they might not actually use for themselves otherwise (Herrera 2018).

Reddit is of specific interest because of its resemblance to the original messaging boards of the early Internet. Not only can feeds be curated, but the format of separate communities on one site makes it easier to keep discourse for a particular community mostly civil and organized, more so than can be done with hashtags, since the latter format cannot be regulated by how relevant hashtags are to their posts. Responsibilities of keeping the Reddit community, or “Subreddit,” a positive environment is split among moderators and community members. Moderators must observe community behaviors and make or change policies based on those behaviors (Seering et al. 2019). For instance, if a particular post’s thread of comments is becoming aggressive, the moderator has the power to “lock” comments and stop the situation from worsening. Enforcement of community policies depends on the moderation style of the community moderators, but it is necessary for a trans-inclusive Subreddit to take its anti-transphobia policy very seriously, keeping a close eye on dog whistles and hateful comments from outsiders on transgender women’s posts.

Users themselves also play a role in building a safe community. Reddit’s voting system for posts and comments gives users power over what kind of content gains enough traction to end up on the front page of the Subreddit or on a user’s general content feed (Squirrel 2019). Even if moderators enforce an anti-transphobia policy perfectly, transphobic users can still exert

power by bombarding transgender women's posts and comments with "downvotes," therefore keeping them further from a casual user's view or even hiding them altogether, as Reddit automatically hides comments that have garnered enough downvotes. Reddit's balance of power between moderators and users gives it the potential for dynamics between transgender and cisgender WLW that are worth investigating.

#### ADDITIONAL GAPS IN THE KNOWLEDGE

This study aims to investigate how transgender women are received in online WLW spaces, but the process of answering this question revealed a need for more investigation on other topics related to this area of research. A topic that occasionally came up was the observation that events pertaining to popular culture affected the reception of transgender women in both mainstream Subreddits and Subreddits made by and for WLW. For instance, a Netflix comedy special by Dave Chappelle and J.K. Rowling's comments on transgender identities were thought to have incited heated discussions about the validity of transgender women on Reddit. Meanwhile, Laverne Cox's transgender character on Netflix's *Orange is the New Black* and the rise of what is known as the "e-girl aesthetic," which is similar to a type of fashion that has been popular among transgender women for years, were credited for bringing about positive visibility for transgender women on Reddit. It would be insightful to study the way popular culture's representation of transgender women affects online spaces' attitudes toward them, and if the reaction to representation varies between media spaces, such as news media or offline spaces.

Another form of change in attitudes would arise when queer Subreddits known to be transphobic were banned from the platform, causing members to scramble to find a new online hub in other queer Subreddits. This would lead to an influx of transphobic content on the



remaining queer Subreddits. Research is needed to study the pattern of attempting to take over other Subreddits rather than making a new one and determining possible solutions to avoid an uptick of transphobic content in queer spaces anytime a transphobic Subreddit is banned.

Participants of this study occasionally mentioned differing views of their own transgender identities. Some women were open and proud about their transgender identity online and offline, while others preferred to be perceived only as a woman without being recognized as transgender at all. The difference in attitudes toward the identity of transgender women complicates what a space that welcomes transgender women might look like. While most participants liked r/actuallesbians's inclusion of transgender women in conversation, some of them were put off by it. It may be beneficial to investigate the reason for the difference in these attitudes and how that affects transgender women-loving-women's perception of transgender and WLW representation. For instance, if the women who prefer to keep their transgender identity private also prefer to keep their WLW identity private and if they conceal this part of themselves out of safety or for other reasons.

The final pattern worth delving deeper into is that some participants admitted to witnessing cisnormativity but would then talk about transnormativity in transgender Subreddits or connect the assumption that users are cisgender to a broader behavior on Reddit, in which users assume that all users are male. In other words, participants would occasionally qualify their experience of cisnormativity by connecting it to other behaviors. It may be worth looking into the different ways transgender women perceive and judge cisnormativity, and cisnormativity's connection to other normativities.

## CONCLUSION

After being historically sidelined by both the gay liberation movement and the feminist movement, the lesbian community turned to lesbian separatism. The hurt from that era created an environment in the community that still struggles to accept anything that can be associated with maleness and the patriarchy. Butch women's gender expression is often unintelligible to the community, bisexual women's desires are seen as treacherous, and transgender women's bodies are demonized. Although transgender women's presence in the lesbian community is the current popular iteration of the "border wars," it certainly is not the first. All three of these sections of the lesbian community are needed in the discourse of the gender system to properly liberate everyone—including the lesbian community—from a cisnormative and heteronormative patriarchy. Though transgender women are not always easily accepted into this community, a queer theory approach to redefining the lesbian identity and moving it away from the foundation of an AFAB body has been crucial to making these spaces accessible to transgender women. This understanding is not enough. Transgender women need to not only have a presence in the WLW community but a secure presence, through which they can join the lesbian discourse and engage in the community as much as their cisgender sisters without fearing harm. This much can be gathered by looking through the history of transgender women in offline WLW spaces.

The separation between physical life and virtual life through anonymous sites like Reddit provide a safer and more accessible entry into the WLW community. Yet there is still the threat of online harassment, especially with the way anonymity emboldens people to vent their personal frustrations without real life repercussions. Online spaces are crucial for many LGBT+ individuals to find community support, so it is important to understand how the historical relationship between transgender and cisgender WLW translates into an online environment. The purpose of this study is to bridge the gap between the knowledge of online spaces and the

complex history of how transgender women are received in spaces for queer women. The findings will hopefully encourage more research in the area.

## Methodology

### METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study aims to answer the question, “How are transgender women received in online spaces made by and for women-loving women?” Primary qualitative data was collected by interviewing a total of 15 transgender women who have been members of the Subreddit r/actuallesbians for at least six months.

Using interviews as the data collection method allows for participants themselves to describe their experiences in r/actuallesbians as well as other online and offline spaces. Because this study focuses on the reception of transgender members of the community rather than the community itself, talking to actual transgender women was the best method to answer the research question. Though online ethnography was considered, such a method would only have been able to observe anything that is on the Subreddit in the moment that it is being viewed. In other words, deleted posts and comments, direct messages, follower notifications, and the content of other Subreddits would have been missed. Different individuals from the transgender community will also have different opinions of what support and discrimination look like, which is reflected in the responses. It is necessary to allow transgender women the chance to voice their opinions to properly capture the variety of views as opposed to relying on the observations of one individual who is not a transgender woman. Through interviews, this study can rely on the personal experiences and observations of many rather than just one person (Gerson and Damaske 2020).

This study focused only on the members of the Subreddit r/actuallesbians, because of the trans-positive environment that the community fosters. Even though r/actuallesbians aims for

positivity, it is certainly not perfect. It is a common occurrence for the Subreddit to be brigaded by outsiders who post transphobic comments and downvote posts and comments made by transgender women in the community. And even members sometimes fail to maintain the trans-positive environment in comment sections. This means that it is the WLW Reddit community that will have the best combination of both positive and negative interactions rather than just negative ones.

The research contributes to two areas of study: a sociological perspective of online spaces as well as the sociology of gender and sexuality. Research on online spaces is relatively new, and studies become more sparse as one narrows the scope of research to a platform or a particular group of people using online spaces. Gender and sexuality are grouped together in this case, as the intersectionality of being both transgender and a woman-loving-woman is a unique lived experience, given that both identities have been increasingly scrutinized in the past decade.

#### METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

Participants were recruited through online solicitation. A study advertisement was created and posted in a smaller women-loving-women Subreddit known to have overlapping members with the Subreddit r/actuallesbians as well as an active community of transgender women. Originally, the advertisement was meant to be posted on r/actuallesbians itself. Prior permission from the moderating team to make the post was revoked for unknown reasons, but the moderators gave permission to post the advertisement in other Subreddits (as long as the moderating teams of those Subreddits gave their own permission).

Despite my inability to recruit directly from r/actuallesbian, it was still very important for participants to be a part of that community rather than just any WLW Subreddit. R/actuallesbians

is one of the most trans-inclusive WLW Subreddits, known for having a strict and active moderating team that works to not only protect transgender members but to also maintain a positive atmosphere. Because of this, it is common for the moderators to observe posts and comment threads that become heated and lock the comment section, meaning users are no longer allowed to contribute to the discussion, if debates become personal and hostile. Other active WLW subreddits either do not enforce their anti-transphobia community rules well enough or are outright hostile to transgender women and other transgender individuals. Either way, such environments not only encourage mostly negative interactions but could discourage many transgender women from participating altogether. The atmosphere of the Subreddit is casual, with most posts being humorous or uplifting content about being a WLW. Angry posts usually consist of someone venting about a homophobic or misogynistic experience, especially focused on unwanted sexual attention from men. Aside from the humor, there are also a lot of posts in which users seek validation not only on their gender identity but also on their personal characteristics and whether they would be seen as attractive by other WLW. Most posts, regardless of the topic, receive positive comments in agreement with the original poster.

R/actuallesbians is the largest WLW Subreddit, so it provides both supportive and humorous content for its diverse population. The community allows for transgender men and non-binary individuals who formerly identified as WLW as well as women who are questioning if they are WLW or who identify with a sexual or romantic orientation that is not exclusively attracted to women. The Subreddit attracts a lot of transgender users, particularly transgender WLW who have a visible presence because of both their considerable input in discussions and their use of the flair system. The flair system is a function on Reddit that gives users an extra title or identifier next to their username when they post in a community. In the context of

r/actuallesbians, the flair system identifies the user's sexual identity (bisexual, pansexual, lesbian, etc) and gender identity (non-binary, transgender woman, etc). Though it is common practice for users on Reddit to mention a relevant part of their identity when contributing to a discussion, the flair system in r/actuallesbian automatically identifies the gender identity and sexual/romantic orientation of users who opt to use it. Because of this feature, transgender women on r/actuallesbians are visible in any comment thread they participate in. Such visibility makes it easier for all those in the Subreddit to observe how transgender members are received and interacted with in the Subreddit.

Due to the overwhelmingly positive and inclusive atmosphere of r/actuallesbians, results of this study are likely biased toward a positive view of the Subreddit. However, this is still the best community to recruit from, given that it is the largest of all WLW Subreddits, and its trans-inclusive nature makes interactions between transgender and cisgender women more common than they typically are in other WLW spaces. It was also common among participants to avoid other communities that they felt were not as inclusive, so focusing on r/actuallesbians yields more data for the purposes of the study. Still, I aimed to remedy this bias by asking participants to compare r/actuallesbians to other online spaces, including other WLW Subreddits. I also asked specifically about negative and positive experiences separately rather than an overall evaluation of the online space to paint a clearer picture of the dynamics between transgender and cisgender WLW on Reddit.

Participants were only eligible for the study if they identified as transgender women, were attracted to other women, were at least 18 years of age, were a member of the Subreddit r/actuallesbians for at least six months, and were at least conversational in English. Because this is a study focusing on an online community, participants from outside of the United States were

also eligible to participate. The screening process involved looking at a participant's Reddit user profile. The profile was scanned for words such as "lesbian," "transgender," "woman," "MtF," etc. using the CTRL+F function. This scan not only showed posts, comments, and bio entries containing these keywords but also relevant transgender and WLW Subreddits that the user participated in. Screening participants in this manner rather than just looking at posts and comments allowed for lurkers—Reddit users who read posts and comments without writing any of their own—to pass the screening process and be interviewed. Other signs on participant profiles were observed, such as how long they have been on Reddit, whether they had a designed Reddit avatar, and their karma. A designed avatar on an account that has been active for many years is a sign that the user is legitimate and has an idea of how they would like to be perceived when participating in online discourse. Karma is a point system on Reddit that is gained or lost depending on the amount of upvotes and downvotes that users receive on posts and comments. Online trolls tend to have very little or even negative amounts of karma because of their instigation. Positive karma along with an older account is a reliable sign that the user is not an internet troll.

A total of 20 women expressed interest in being interviewed, but only 15 followed through with scheduling and participating in an interview. Four of the women that did not participate stopped responding to follow-up emails before an interview could be set up, and one had a profile that could not be located for screening due to an unknown reason. Zoom Pro was the main tool for interviews. The audio of these interviews was recorded through Zoom as well as an external digital audio recorder. Two participants preferred to complete the interview through a phone call, in which case only the external audio recorder was used. Once recorded, the audio was transcribed using Rev's automated transcription service. To provide flexibility to



participants who may not have the privacy to participate in an audio interview, the option of a written interview was offered. Participants who requested this option would be given the same information as participants doing audio interviews and were also given a docx file of the interview questions to fill out and send back through a secure email. They would be instructed not to put their name anywhere on the form. Only one participant chose the text option over an audio interview. Overall, the text-based option yielded much shorter responses, likely because there was no indication of how many words the responses to the open-ended questions should be. The text-based interview did not allow for follow-up questions, but it was also less redundant and verbose than the audio interviews.

Interviews lasted around thirty to forty-five minutes, with the longest interview being about an hour and a half and the shortest being around twenty-five minutes. Interview questions (see appendix) included a few demographic questions about age, race, and level of education, as well as a few questions about engagement in r/actuallesbians. The rest of the questions focused on various types of interactions that participants may have witnessed or participated in while in r/actuallesbians, including instances of transphobia, affirmation, education, and protests. A few questions asked them to compare certain aspects of r/actuallesbians with other WLW Subreddits and transgender Subreddits as well as Reddit in general. Final questions focused on comparing the amount of support provided by online LGBT+ groups versus offline ones. One question asking whether the participant talked about her identity with other LGBT+ individuals was interpreted by almost all participants as asking if they had a support system offline to discuss such topics with.

Follow-up questions that were not part of the original interview script typically asked for examples of what participants had experienced or witnessed and asked participants if they drew

connections between different aspects of the community (e.g., does the flair system you mentioned in the Subreddit affect any cisnormativity that may be present in the community?) I also had to repeat questions in cases where participants veered off topic; however, I made sure to let participants finish any experiences they wanted to share both out of respect and in case they ended up providing additional information of interest (Gerson and Damaske 2020). This way, I was able to make additional notes of data I would not have gotten with only the written interview questions, and some of these additional data painted a clearer picture for the results.

Rev.com's automated transcription service was used to transcribe the interviews. Though it was not as accurate as the professional transcriber option, it was not as costly and gave an additional sense of reassurance that the audio was securely transcribed. Transcripts were then carefully reviewed to catch any errors, which were mostly Reddit-related terms or online lingo that the automated transcription service was not familiar with.

## METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The de-identified interview transcripts were analyzed using ATLAS.ti. Tenets of grounded theory, rather than true grounded theory itself, were used to guide the analysis, as I already had some broad albeit undefined themes in mind, and I did not simultaneously code while continuing to collect data (Detering and Waters 2021). The data were analyzed for themes of cisnormativity, engagement level, harassment experienced, and community support. However, these concepts were not concretely defined until later in the coding process to keep them grounded in the data.

Analysis began through open coding. The first transcript was examined and coded for all of the aforementioned themes as well as additional details about the participant that may have

affected their responses (e.g., if she visited the Subreddit itself or only saw posts on her feed, whether the participant had a reliable support system, how online and offline groups were compared by the participant, etc.). After that first transcript, codes were organized into groups, including community and moderating team responses to transphobia, methods of harassment, content of transphobic material encountered, personal traits that seemed relevant to the participant's responses, the participant's reaction to transphobia, evaluating online and offline spaces, and other factors that participants found to be welcoming or unwelcoming in Subreddits. The codes created at that point were defined accordingly.

After creating, defining, and organizing about half the transcripts, patterns began to emerge. The memo function of ATLAS.ti was used to mark these patterns and make notes of ideas that occurred along the way. The memos were created by reviewing the transcripts coded thus far and delving deeper into certain codes, such as changes over time, the inviting or unwelcoming atmosphere of Subreddits, cisnormativity, exclusion, reactions to transphobia, and others. More categories were created, including one for the different ways cisnormativity is experienced, as opposed to cisnormativity being another form of harassment; changes over time in the Subreddit or Reddit in general that the participant mentioned; and a code group just for affirmation posts, since participants had varying reactions to them. These code groups were treated as parent codes with child codes under each.

Codes and groups were also occasionally merged to avoid redundancy. Every few transcripts, I would stop and merge these items and redefine them as needed. In the middle of the first stage of analysis, I merged and deleted these codes as necessary to keep the codes manageable and organized, but I continued this process after reviewing all the transcripts to

conceptualize the codes into larger themes, as is standard for analysis guided by grounded theory (Detering and Waters 2021; Susanne Friese 2012).

The memos were continuously added to and attached to some interview excerpts to think about the patterns observed more broadly. Writing memos alongside coding helped to establish connections between codes early on, and writing them throughout the process of analysis, made connections between codes and their deeper meanings even clearer (Corbin and Strauss 2015). Memos were also expanded upon as codes were merged to catch any questions or ideas about what it meant for said codes to be grouped together. In other words, I was redefining codes as I merged them, and I used memos to discuss the new broader definition and how it fit into analysis.

#### DIFFICULTIES AND OBSTACLES

One of the biggest obstacles for this study was the recruitment and sampling. The moderating teams from many of the WLW Subreddits did not respond to the request to advertise the study, and the moderating team of r/actuallesbians revoked their permission. Only one of the smaller WLW Subreddits gave permission to post the advertisement. Additionally, this study was going to draw also from snowball sampling, but the two personal contacts that I needed for this sampling method were unavailable due to personal reasons. Finally, although there were no geographic eligibility requirements for the study, I was limited in the countries that I could send digital gift cards to. Given the circumstances, all of the r/actuallesbians members that participated came from one smaller WLW Subreddit and were either from a North American or a Western European country. Additionally, the vast majority of participants were white, which

limits the insight that can be drawn from this data pertaining to the way different minority statuses create a unique experience for transgender WLW.

An unexpected challenge that arose was a security breach in the email I was using to communicate with participants. At the time when I was still waiting to hear back from some participants about setting up an interview, I received over a hundred notifications that my email address was being used to send spam to other emails associated with the University of Houston. Within ten minutes of emails being sent out, Microsoft Outlook automatically locked out anyone that was using the email. Emails had been deleted as I finished communicating with participants, so only the five participants I was waiting to hear back from were affected. I reported the incident to the university's information technology team and recovered my account that same day. I also reported the incident to a member of the University of Houston's Institutional Review Board and worked with her to create an adequate report on the incident and conceive steps to remedy the situation. I was instructed by the IRB to inform participants of what happened but was allowed to continue recruiting and interviewing. I emailed the affected participants and offered them a chance to set up an interview if they were still interested, but none expressed a desire to continue. The incident limited my sample to just 15 women.

This study aimed to give equal opportunity for "lurkers," members of Subreddits who only read and vote but do not post or comment, to also share their experiences. Because lurkers have so few posts and comments to scan for keywords on their profiles, their screening relied on subtler signs. For instance, some lurkers may not be comfortable sharing their identity online but may still be comfortable leaving short comments in transgender Subreddits and WLW Subreddits without indicating their own identity. Lurkers still tended to accrue positive karma (albeit in smaller amounts) and design a Reddit avatar, which were still adequate signs of a legitimate

account. Though such a screening was likely not as accurate as the screening of active users, the risk of accidentally recruiting internet trolls and other impeding individuals was minimized by the fact that the study advertisement was posted in a small Subreddit that has a vocal community of transgender women and has not suffered brigades from outsiders.

Written interviews were also more challenging than audio interviews. Although written interviews provided adequate responses, follow-up questions and requests for clarification were not possible. The participant who provided written answers to the interviews also did not ask for clarification at any time, and there is a chance that this format decreased her willingness to ask for such clarification, as it would have required sending another email and waiting for a response. Additionally, the lack of audio meant that tone and other forms of non-verbal communication were impossible for participants to convey, so I did not ask for elaboration on certain answers that would have called for it if a noteworthy tone had been detected.

Despite the trouble with text-based interviews, I believe there is a place for them in studies focusing on social media groups. Especially with platforms that value anonymity, such as Reddit, keeping the real world and one's online account separate is important to many users (Triggs et al. 2021). It is possible that conducting text-based interviews within the platform that participants are being recruited from could result in more natural responses (Herrera 2018). The audio interviews were richer in data than the text-based interview, but if I had read more about conducting interviews within direct messages on Reddit, I would have at least considered it.

As for analysis, I believe an approach drawing on tenets of grounded theory worked well for this study. Even though it is not often the best approach when working with qualitative data analysis software, I believe my sample was small enough to work well with this approach (Detering and Waters 2021). Given my position as someone who is not a transgender woman, I

also believe it was important to use an approach to analysis that would be grounded in the data, reflecting on what participants said, without allowing a preconceived hypothesis to narrow my focus.

## Results and Discussion

To answer the question of “How are transgender women received in online spaces made by and for women-loving-women?” I coded responses to questions varying from personal experiences on different Subreddits to what the women heard or witnessed on r/actuallesbians. After grouping codes, I ended with the following main themes: harassment, in which I describe the different types of transphobic content, the community and moderating team responses, and the participants’ various reactions to transphobic harassment; cisnormativity, which I describe as the most prevalent form of transphobia and a gateway to microaggressions and later overt harassment if left unchecked; affirmations, exploring the support that keeps transgender women coming back to r/actuallesbians or that puts them off; and reliance on the Subreddit, which looks into the importance of the Subreddit to the sample of transgender women and whether any of the traits noted about them affect their reliance on it. I additionally explored what makes an appealing community on Reddit for the participants, which may seem tangential to the research question but delves deeper into the world of queer Subreddits and why r/actuallesbians stands out beyond its general trans-positivity.

Overall, the majority of participants had a positive view of r/actuallesbians, which is unsurprising, given its popularity and reputation of trans-positivity. However, most participants also confirmed that there was cisnormativity present in the community, likely from members, as well as harassment, which was assumed to come from users outside of r/actuallesbians.

For the list of questions from the interview script, please refer to the appendix.



## ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

Though participation requirements allowed for women around the world to be interviewed, all participants lived in either the United States or European countries, namely the United Kingdom, Germany, and Denmark. 80% of participants were Non-Hispanic White, with one of them being mixed with Mediterranean descent. Two participants identified as Hispanic—one of which also identified as “everything except Asian”— and one participant was Bengali. The average age of participants was 26.5, with 34 being the oldest and 19 being the youngest. Half of the participants were 25 or younger, and the other half were 26 and older. Eleven of the participants identified as lesbians, one of which also identified as asexual and another as demisexual. Three identified themselves as bisexual but either mostly attracted to women or romantically attracted to women, and one participant identified as queer. All participants completed at least high school, three had bachelor’s degrees, one had an associate’s degree, and one had a PhD. A third of the participants had been members of r/actuallesbians for about a year, four of them had been members for two to three years, and four of them were members for four to five years. The shortest time someone was a member was about six months, and one participant had been a member for a decade. All but one participant opted for audio interviews, and there was a large difference in the amount of detail provided, as the text-based interview did not give the chance for follow-up questions. Two participants preferred to call for the interview rather than use Zoom, but there were no noticeable differences between interviews through Zoom and phone calls.

## HARASSMENT EXPERIENCED

*Evaluating Transphobia*

Reddit overall seems to have a transphobic reputation, as all participants reported experiencing or witnessing transphobic harassment somewhere on the platform, especially the popular mainstream Subreddits. Some reported finding evidence of transphobic content in women-focused Subreddits, WLW Subreddits, and r/actuallesbians itself. The most reported type of harassment came in the form of posts and comments, though this is likely because it is also the most visible. The average transphobic post or comment consisted of either microaggressions or much more hostile language that invalidated transgender women's identities. Even though overt forms of transphobic commentary were similar in theme, participants viewed the severity of harassment differently according to where it was observed.

For the mainstream communities outside of queer Subreddits, participants noted the most amount of transphobia and to the highest severity. One woman, a 22-year-old white lesbian, went into detail about the content of transphobia experienced:

If I mention being trans or transness in a non LGBT+ themed subreddit I always get bombarded with transmisogynistic comments and invasive, transphobic questions. Reddit is filled with transmisogynistic jokes/memes and anytime trans rights or the existence of trans people comes up I see the same comments about trans athletes and bathrooms and how deceitful trans women are. There are a few subs that just culturally don't tolerate that (transphobia is met with overwhelming backlash and downvotes) and I try to either stick to those subs or keep my mouth shut and avoid the comments.

The content mentioned, especially the themes of what spaces transgender women can occupy and the supposed deceit that transgender women exhibit could be considered common themes of transphobic rhetoric in both online and offline discourse. They echo the common talking point that transgender women are invaders in spaces where people value a separation between genders for the sake of women. Such sentiment was used years ago to justify the exclusion of transgender women in lesbian music festivals and the feminist movement. Online spaces continue the narrative of pitting transgender issues against women's issues (Richardson

2013; Vasquez 2014; McConnell et al. 2015). Also highlighted in this quote is the view of certain Subreddits as safe havens from transphobia and the way the participant often will not engage with comments if there is a risk of encountering transphobia.

Women-focused Subreddits and other WLW Subreddits had mixed reviews. This could be due to the fact that some participants chose to disqualify what they considered to be TERF Subreddits from their answers when asked about WLW Subreddits that they did not want to join (see question 11 of the interview script in the appendix). However, not all participants chose to do this, and with the many WLW Subreddits that exist, there is a lot of room for vastly different experiences. Still, those who did have experiences with the other WLW Subreddits mentioned unenthusiastic efforts to be trans-inclusive. One 19-year-old white queer woman describes, “[r/ActuallyLesbians] pretends to be trans inclusive, but it's just all like, veiled transphobia in the comments and whatnot, and they don't do anything to try to combat it.” That specific Subreddit does have a rule against invalidating members’ identities and experiences, but it seems that the rule may be poorly enforced. In fact, this is a common pattern for some WLW Subreddits. While I saw that they have a written rule against transphobia, they hardly enforce it according to participants. Some of the moderators on Reddit prefer to set rules in a lax manner and allow community members to settle their own issues (Seering et al. 2019). But if the community members themselves make little to no effort to discourage such comments, then transphobia is allowed to fester. Not all WLW Subreddits are so lenient, but those that are have a tendency to devolve into trans-exclusionary behaviors.

Interestingly, the majority of participants who spotted transphobic content on r/actuallesbians believed that it came from outsiders rather than community members themselves. This is a common belief among the Subreddit that has never been proven, but there

are two main pieces of evidence that make it credible: the pattern of transphobic content rising when a known transphobic Subreddit plans a brigade and the quick community and moderating team response of dismantling transphobic content. As stated by one participant, a white demisexual lesbian who has been a member of r/actuallesbians for about two years:

I see posts eventually [if] I scroll down far enough. I see new posts that have just been made and there is a big issue of TERFs lurking on the subreddit. And so I have encountered comments from them specifically, but the moderator team and the other users are exceptionally good, I'd say better than almost any other Subreddit I've been in about shutting them down, removing the comments.

The belief that outsiders were responsible for transphobic content in a community was not applied to other WLW-focused Subreddits, despite most of them having a written community rule against transphobic content. Evidently, there is a sense of trust between most participants and the r/actuallesbians community due to its history of standing against transphobia, a reputation that seems to have not been gained by other WLW Subreddits.

The type of transphobia experienced depended largely on where it was experienced. Across the board, the most common form of transphobic harassment on Reddit was making posts or comments relating to transgender women in a negative way. Mainstream Subreddits exhibited more overt transphobia, as detailed in an earlier quote, but the most common content of harassment in r/actuallesbians and other WLW Subreddits was microaggression. Microaggressions reported in interviews included backhanded compliments, dog whistles, fetishization and infantilization of transgender women, and defending very precise language about gender and sexuality.

As one asexual lesbian participant pointed out, the subtlety of microaggressions seemingly has the purpose of pushing the limits of what is acceptable in a Subreddit:

Participant: I think over time I would say that much of the transphobia, it has maybe shifted a little bit, it's much less obvious and a little bit more subtle in the way of, it comes across as a, "oh, we're making a statement," but it's the sort of thing that, unless you're a trans person, you really can't call it out. So or you may not be sure what it is, so.

Interviewer: Okay. So there are just instances where it's too subtle for a cisgender person to call it out, is what you're saying?

Participant: Yeah...that actually is a bad thing, in the sense that it creates a situation where if you're a moderator, it can very quickly be the sort of thing that feels like you may not know what to do with it because it's a, "oh, well, this doesn't obviously break the rules," but at the same time, unless people complain about it, it can be very tricky to moderate. And then to explain why you were moderating the way you did.

r/actuallesbians has successfully tightened its regulations on transphobic content over the years, which has placed it in a new problem of trying to figure out where to draw the line for microaggressive commentary. Some participants mentioned microaggressions that consisted of commenters belittling the positive input of transgender women in comment sections. It can become difficult to determine the right steps as a moderator when it comes to subtle transphobic content, and it leads to comment threads on the Subreddit that clearly push the boundary of acceptable language without getting too aggressive and staying nuanced enough to be very difficult to call out even by the community. And even though the r/actuallesbians moderators prefer to err on the side of caution and shut down heated conversations, ending discussions that are only problematic can easily be seen as controlling and unfairly censoring users, which could drive members away.

And yet, drawing a line for problematic discussions to not continue further is crucial to preventing a Subreddit from devolving into a transphobic space. Posts and comments, as opposed to informal conversations, take more time and thought to compose, which leads to more coherent talking points. Transphobes can easily take advantage of this through the use of

microaggressions in their text. Even if overt and hostile transphobia is called out in a space, if the community is too lenient, the community members will not be able to recognize certain dog whistles or underhanded remarks. The more that they are allowed to, the more transphobes will push boundaries of what is acceptable trans-focused content in an online community. A 29-year-old Danish lesbian explained what happened with a thread in which people were strictly defining queer identities:

The whole thing just seemed kind of petty and a little bit spiteful. And the response was not much from the moderators at first. But then the community about a day or two after it was like, "what the hell was up with that?" And the moderators kind of walked in on that, on that particular discussion, a discussion that was by comments three to four times louder than the previous discussion in which everyone was just arguing about semantics... And one of the moderators walked in and was like, "yeah, we, we couldn't tell what those people were doing. They weren't necessarily even doing anything intentional or trying to be harmful or hurtful or anything, but like, it was kind of a bad thread and a bunch of bad takes and we shouldn't have let it happen. And we'll try and keep a better eye out the next time." And that was the end result. And it, the subsequent, the semantic arguments that pop up every once in a while, haven't been nearly as overt or as spiteful as those.

This is an instance of transphobic content that was allowed to push the boundaries of what is acceptable in a Subreddit. And these posts will pop up in any space that is not specifically for transgender individuals: a call for a new identity just for women attracted to a specific kind of genitalia, a post rigidly defining the lesbian identity in a way that suggests exclusion, a declaration that a certain statement is not transphobic before anyone questions it, "mourning the loss of a lesbian" who recently came out as a transgender man. All of these have popped up in the past according to participants and based on my own observations within the community. Each push that boundary and invite passive community members to do the same. And such forms of microaggression can be extremely difficult for community members to point out because they are so subtle. Most WLW Subreddits start off with a trans-inclusive attitude, hence the rules against transphobia. But as time passes, improper regulation of content can invite

problematic and exclusionary discussions. At worst, spaces can devolve into hostility and become an echo chamber full of angry venting about different identities. And at that point, it may not be worth trying to recover the WLW space.

It appears that the way transphobia is perceived in a Subreddit depends largely on how the community responds to it. Given that almost none of the mainstream Subreddits have serious rules against bigotry, they are considered by all participants to be risky places to visit in terms of transphobic content. Some WLW Subreddits, despite their rules against transphobia, seem too lax to actually build a community that defends members from bigotry, so it is accepted that microaggressions and other transphobic language are part of that space's culture. However, r/actuallesbians and WLW Subreddits with stricter enforcement earn a reputation for being trans-inclusive, such that any harassment seen on the Subreddit are considered isolated incidents or attacks from outsiders. Though censorship is generally disdained across the Internet, smaller communities on the platform seem to resist bigotry much better when moderators actively enforce rules against it. In addition to this, community members also have a role in calling out transphobia.

#### *Transgender Women's Reactions to Transphobia*

Participants shared their personal reactions to seeing or experiencing transphobic posts and comments. The two most common reactions to such content were for transgender women to avoid participating in spaces and comment threads with prevalent transphobia or to defend themselves and their presence in a community. Though these are two contrary reactions to transphobia, the environment in which the content was present correlated with the different reactions. Instances where participants described defending themselves or witnessing other transgender women defend themselves mostly took place in r/actuallesbians and some of the

more welcoming WLW Subreddits, while instances in which participants avoided participation mostly occurred in mainstream Subreddits and WLW Subreddits that did not defend transgender women. Though participants only cited discomfort and anger as the respective reasons for either avoiding a thread or defending themselves, there appears to be a connection between how the rest of the community reacts to transphobia and how transgender women react to it.

R/actuallesbians has established a community that actively calls out transphobic content, which might influence transgender women to feel that they are not standing alone when they defend themselves and that they will have the support of the community by their side. The same cannot be said about mainstream Subreddits, which often do not even have rules against transphobia but only against general discrimination with little specification and enforcement. And many WLW Subreddits may have rules against transphobic language, but if such rules are not enforced by the moderating team, then the community will likely ignore transphobic content.

Another possible reason for the different reactions is a filtering effect. R/actuallesbians community members are quick to downvote and call out transphobic content, and it does not take very long for a moderator to come around and delete them, given that the most downvoted comments become hidden and are moved to the bottom of the comment section automatically by Reddit. Some participants claimed that the vigilant response of the r/actuallesbians moderating team versus that of other Subreddits causes transphobic content to appear less often in r/actuallesbians compared to other places. Observing less transphobia could make it stick out more as a problem presented by one small poster rather than a widespread culture of bigotry. The former circumstance would certainly be less exhausting to fight against.

Many of the participants would go a step further from not participating in transphobic discussions by entirely staying away from places that were rumored to normalize transphobia.



This is perhaps the most advantageous factor of online queer spaces as opposed to offline ones: online spaces can be tailored to each person's preference, including the kind of content they want to see or avoid. When asked about any WLW Subreddits that she did not want to join, one participant—34 years old from the United Kingdom—said she took an additional step in filtering out her content and unfavorable Subreddits in the first place:

I use an extension, which you might've come across called Shinigami Eyes, which I used to filter a lot of my online interactions. And it basically allows users to mark websites or profiles or subreddits as either trans-friendly or not, or, you know, sort of transphobic. And I just ignore anything that gets marked as transphobic. Again, cause I don't want to have to deal with that stuff.

Given that such a service exists and the way that many other transgender women will refuse to look at any Subreddits they have been told are hostile, it is evident that transgender women often filter the amount of transphobia they see as best they can. In this way, they practice boundary maintenance, separating themselves from transphobic cultures online. Additionally, Subreddits with vigilant moderators and community members filter content through both the karma system, deleting comments and banning problematic users. Through the methods of mitigating transphobic content, the space is a little safer than most. Boundary maintenance through both users' content curation and communities' response to transphobia is crucial for transgender women to find a comfortable place in which they can express themselves (Cannon et al. 2017).

#### *Private Harassment Methods*

While private forms of harassment were not as common, they were more difficult for participants to avoid than the public kind. Transphobic direct messages were the most common form of private harassment. This type of attack has a tendency to be much more belligerent and violent than posts and comments. Reddit's default setting makes it so that users will be notified

when they receive a private message and must go into the private chat in order to block a user, so victims of these attacks are guaranteed to read the message. Other private methods of harassment exploited the same notification feature. One participant, a 21-year-old white lesbian who has been a member of r/actuallesbians for six months, stated, “Back in June...there was an influx of trolls on both the subreddit r/trans as well as later on r/actuallesbians... Mostly they were making accounts with names and profiles to sort of elicit a negative response from trans women specifically from those subreddits.” Once again, the source of harassment was considered to be outsiders of r/actuallesbians, with the Subreddit along with r/trans being two targets of this type of harassment. Said trolls created accounts with usernames along the lines of “i\_only\_follow\_men” and would then follow users they knew to be transgender women. Reddit’s follow feature automatically notifies users when they have a new follower and who it is, so it was a quick and unavoidable way to spread transphobic messages through notifications. Trolls would easily find their targets in the Subreddits just by finding transgender women who posted or commented, which made it risky to participate in trans-positive or transgender Subreddits. Reddit only recently gave the option to block notifications from followers while keeping other notifications on, so the follow feature was a popular and effective method of harassment for a while.

One participant reported a rare method of harassment using Reddit’s suicide helpline feature. Essentially, Reddit users can report people that seem to be in danger of hurting themselves or others, and a bot will message the reported user a list of suicide hotline numbers in various countries. This was taken advantage of, and the participant was repeatedly spammed with suicide helpline messages.

Though private forms of harassment were not as common as the public ones, they still made participants wary of engaging in online spaces out of fear that their comments would turn them into a target for hatred. Unfortunately, because private methods of harassment fall outside of a moderating team's control, not even the most welcoming WLW Subreddits can prevent these attacks. The most that transgender women can do is block and report users and turn off notifications, which means that they might have to eschew some Reddit features that most others have the privilege of enjoying without fear of harassment.

Both public and private methods of harassment make most online spaces on Reddit dangerous and exhausting for transgender women to use. As stated before, transgender women have ways to shield themselves from transphobic content entirely, such as community members' warnings about certain Subreddits and the ability to block users. But the danger of transphobic content in these online communities creates a feedback loop that makes it very difficult for an online space to become truly trans-inclusive—meaning that transgender women are not only tolerated but that their input in the community is welcomed and valued. Most transgender women in this study preferred to steer clear of spaces that refused to fight against transphobic content. The result is a community that lacks a visible presence of transgender women, so that the rest of the community does not reprimand transphobia and thus normalizes it, since there seems to be no one to defend from such content. The end result is that it becomes even less likely for the community to open itself up to trans-inclusive content.

Transphobic harassment and the response to it determine how big or small transgender women's platform in a community is. As studied by Case and Stewart (2013), it is not enough for a group to theoretically stand against transphobia, as is the case with the common rule against transphobia across WLW Subreddits. Rather, real and positive interactions must occur between

cisgender and transgender community members. It is important that a community is well-regulated both by its moderating team and its members (Squirrel 2019). Such regulation allows for a space in which transgender women can properly be a part of the WLW community and contribute to the space's culture (Cannon et al. 2017; Walch 2012). Otherwise, microaggressions may push the limits of what is acceptable on a Subreddit far enough to devolve into more overt forms of transphobia becoming acceptable.

## CISNORMATIVITY

### *Body Humor*

The most glaring problem among r/actuallesbians and an issue that plagues all WLW Subreddits is cishnormativity. For this study, cishnormativity is defined as the assumption that everyone is cisgender until proven otherwise. This assumption results in showing little regard for the presence of transgender individuals. All but two participants stated that they witnessed cishnormative content on r/actuallesbians, and some additionally mentioned seeing it on other WLW Subreddits. The cishnormativity reported most consisted of jokes about WLW sexuality and genitalia:

I definitely do think that [cishnormativity] is, that's probably the biggest issue that plagues them... There's a lot of memes like "oh lesbians don't get pregnant. Lesbians don't like penises, X, Y, Z." ...That's where trans people in the comments have to speak up and point out that we are also present and this has been happening less frequently, but it is happening.

As pointed out by the participant, much of the humor around WLW sexuality is tied to the biology of a cisgender woman's body and its expected functions. Cishnormative WLW jokes are still incredibly common, especially with the way that lesbian sexuality revolves around how much lesbians are repulsed by penises. Humor around lesbian sexuality tends to dehumanize

people to just their genitalia: which kind is favorable and which kind is unfavorable. Though cisnormativity often comes in the form of humor, it still regulates what the “normal” body and attraction are for WLW (Boyd 1999; Rudy 2001). This is despite the fact that r/actuallesbians promotes itself as a very open group for anyone who could fall under an expansive definition of the lesbian identity (Tate and Pearson 2015). Through this sexual and body-focused humor, cisnormativity is perpetuated in WLW spaces. Interestingly, outsiders are not assumed to be the ones perpetuating cisnormativity in r/actuallesbians, unlike harassment. Under this logic, cisnormativity is a common part of the culture in r/actuallesbians. As the participant stated, however, there seems to be some mitigation of these jokes recently, which indicates that transgender women have felt comfortable enough to speak out against them, and the rest of the community listened.

### *Socialization*

Another common theme of cisnormativity is separating transgender women from the rest of the WLW community in terms of socialization, explained by a 32-year-old lesbian who has been a member of r/actuallesbians for four years:

Sometimes it has to do with, you know, one of the ones that comes up most common from the cis lesbian side of the house and cis women loving women inside of the house is the concept of socialization. ...the concept gets brought up very ignorantly of, "well, you were born male, you were socialized as a boy. You don't understand at X, Y, and Z." And on the one hand I lived 20-some years of my life pretending to be male. Sure. I could, I could sit here and say, look, I did not have that same experience in grade school, but that does not mean that I, I was socialized male because I also didn't have the male friend group. I didn't have the normal male social experiences as a child because I didn't fit in with them.

The thought that cisgender women are all socialized a certain way that transgender women simply miss out on echoes the historic sentiment of the lesbian and woman consciousness (Rudy 2001; McConnell 2015; Enszer 2016). But again, what are considered

“universal” experiences are reserved for a narrative of the most privileged section of the WLW community. The truth is that such an idea serves to sideline transgender women’s experiences as something outside of what is the actual WLW experience, making it seem out of the ordinary while a cisgender queer woman’s experience is “normal.” By framing transgender women as a section of the community that completely missed out on the socialization for girls, their perspectives are immediately considered less valuable in conversations about gender and sexuality as it pertains to the identity of queer women. It prevents the community from taking in diverse perspectives and learning from each other, instead opting to shut down the conversation for a significant portion of women.

*Participants’ Commentary on Cisnormativity*

The flair system’s relationship to cisnormativity on r/actuallesbians is complicated, according to participants’ mixed thoughts. To reiterate, the flair system is a function on Subreddits that adds an additional title or identifier next to a person’s username; in the context of r/actuallesbians, the flair system often marks user’s sexual/romantic orientation and their gender identity (usually non-binary or transgender woman). One white participant who has been a member of r/actuallesbians for a year was asked if she sees cisnormativity in r/actuallesbians, to which she responded, “Honestly, no. Cause the flair system they have, you can tag yourself as whatever you are, and it's just like, not really brought up and there's a lot of trans experiences and other things on there. So I don't, I don't think it's very cisnormative at all.” Here, the flair system is cited as a reason why r/actuallesbians is not cisnormative: it makes transgender members visible, but their marked identities are not brought up in discussion. That accompanied with the discussions of transgender issues on the Subreddit make the space feel less overrun by

cisgender members. However, another participant felt that the flair system reinforced cisnormativity:

So cisnormativity in that sense is I think very much just an extension of people's tendency in all situations when they're interacting with anonymous people to assume that the people they're talking to are just like themselves. So like, obviously you see that with sort of men assuming that other posters are also men. And I'd say that, I would say that there is a culture of cisnormativity because there's also this odd undercurrent of trans women on r/actuallesbians in particular almost universally declaring themselves as such. And I think that kind of reinforces this idea that anyone who does not use that flair is cis.

Though the flair system also covers sexual/romantic orientation due to the diversity of identities in r/actuallesbians, it functions differently regarding gender. Only transgender women, non-binary users, and other non-cisgender individuals use the flair system to show their gender identity, which leaves the assumption that those who do not mark it are cis. Using the system like this directly reinforces the concept that all users are cisgender unless the flair system proves otherwise. The reason is that it reserves the use of the flair system for pointing out only one identity rather than all; thus, transgender women, non-binary people, and transgender men are tagged like exceptions to the expectation of all users being cisgender. The issue is not so much that transgender women are identifying themselves as such at all, but rather that cisgender users see no reason to identify themselves as cisgender in r/actuallesbians.

Another interesting note from the quote above is the comparison of cisnormativity to the broader assumption that all users are male across Reddit, especially in mainstream Subreddits. Other participants made the same connection, demonstrating that in both cases, the majority of a group envisions the rest of the community to look the way the majority looks and identify the way the majority identifies. Like this connection, a couple of participants connected cisnormativity to assumptions that transgender WLW make as well:

I think virtually anything negative I could say about the cis side of the community in r/actuallesbians. If I, I take half a step back, I could say the same thing about the trans side of it... For every little conflict like that really is equal on both sides. It's very easy for me as a trans woman to sit here and say, oh, the cis are attacking us. If I take a half a step back, I have yet to see any one-sided attack on any one group of people in r/actuallesbians.

This participant specifically made this connection three different times while discussing cisnormativity and general transphobia. She was one of the participants that did not believe cisnormativity was present in the community, possibly because she places transgender women's criticisms of cisgender women on the same level as cisgender women's criticisms of transgender women. Another participant compared the cisnormativity of r/actuallesbians to a transnormativity exhibited by transgender Subreddits. Participants made different connections to broader patterns of what was considered "human nature" in assuming that others share one's own similar identity. The only time that this concept ever made a connection with the topic at hand was during the discussion of cisnormativity.

Additionally, I coded instances in which transgender women mentioned how common transphobia was or the futility of fighting it, and this code was most closely associated with cisnormativity than any other type of transphobia. A Bengali lesbian who has been a member of r/actuallesbians for about ten years summarized the sentiment best:

There are a lot of jokes about like, you know, like loving pussy or whatever, you know. I'm kind of used to it at this point. I think it was a lot, it used to be a lot more hurtful to me. I think at this point I'm kind of used to it, like you see that stuff in real life, lesbian communities as well. I'm not saying that it's a good thing or that people should get used to it. You know, I wish I didn't have to get used to it, but I would say at this point, that's where I am with those sorts of posts.



Such a sentiment was prevalent among participants that noticed cisnormativity. Though they recognized that it was harmful and problematic, they themselves were often desensitized to it because of how common it is even outside of r/actuallesbians. Some even explained that if they were hurt by cisnormativity, it would be impossible for them to participate in any of the non-transgender Subreddits. The prevalence of cisnormativity is a sign that the essentialist framing of gender lives on to this day in WLW spaces and affects how people frame the WLW identity in their minds. Though r/actuallesbians has a good habit of identifying various types of overt and covert transphobia, the community often fails to call out cisnormativity. Directly tackling cisnormativity through more posts on body diversity would elevate the space to one in which transgender women feel comfortable participating in any thread.

#### *Additional Normativities*

Traces of other normativities were mentioned by some participants. One woman who identified as bisexual mentioned that she used to experience biphobia on r/actuallesbians due to lax moderation years ago. This indicates that r/actuallesbians once perpetuated the same attitudes of biphobia that were present in offline spaces. It calls into question the use of the term “lesbians” in the most popular WLW Subreddit. Even though the name was made in direct response to the pornographic Subreddit r/lesbians, the decision to keep the Subreddit name rather than create a new space that acknowledges other WLW places lesbians at the forefront of Reddit’s WLW community. It also is an example of how bisexual women and other queer women must accept “actual lesbian” as the boundary object of the WLW community on Reddit (Herrera 2018).

Two participants who identified as butch and one who was boy-moding—meaning she was presenting as a cisgender man at the time—felt that there was femme privilege and

cis-passing privilege present in the Subreddit. Selfies are not typical in the Subreddit, but it is common to see pictures of famous women or models, who are almost always femme-presenting. Femme-privilege in the Subreddit mainly consisted of femme-presenting women getting more traction on their posts and various women describing themselves as femme-for-femme and exhibiting exclusionary tendencies toward butch women and masculine-presenting women. In all three cases, participants felt less comfortable participating when these instances came up. Privileging feminine appearance is another way that WLW bodies are policed, as criticisms against those attracted to butch women are quite common in these spaces (Lev et al. 2018; Rossiter 2015). They reinforce the idea that only a specific kind of attraction to women is valid.

## SUPPORT AND INCLUSION EXPERIENCED

### *Interactions with the Community*

Most participants had a positive view on the support and inclusion experienced in r/actuallesbians, either as something they rely on for themselves or as something they can appreciate to be important for other transgender women. Support that participants witnessed or received came in many forms. One very simple one was the size and visibility of the population of transgender women on the Subreddit. Even though some participants feel that the flair system perpetuates cisnormativity, it is a useful way for users who are considering joining r/actuallesbians to see how common it is for other transgender women to participate. Typically, a large population of transgender women in a Subreddit is a sign that they are accepted and feel comfortable being a part of that space.

The Subreddit's large population makes it easy to find other people in similar life situations that they are struggling with, which means that some participants can find other people

to bond with and seek advice from. Additionally, participants noted that transgender women were included in a flirtatious banter that is common across most WLW Subreddits. Two participants also reported exchanging jokes between other members in a comment thread, and another said that it was common for her comments to get replies. Transgender women experience instances of being included within day-to-day dialogue within the Subreddit, which indicate that their input is valued in the community.

Another form of support they found very welcoming was the effort members put into being trans-inclusive not only in the Subreddit but in their personal lives. Occasionally, cisgender women come into *r/actuallesbians* asking for advice on a circumstance involving a transgender woman, such as the following post noticed by a Bulgarian bisexual woman who has been a member of the Subreddit for two years:

Someone was asking, "Hey, I'm going on a date with a trans woman. Is there anything that like, any no-nos that I can avoid?" And I was like, and most people inside the comment threads were just like, "yeah, just like, treat her like any other woman, that's all you need to do" or being a little bit like, helpful and so on. And I was just like, oh, it's nice that someone asked. And the answers were like, all positive.

Though the post exposes an unfamiliarity with transgender women, the participant was happy to see someone making an effort to be trans-positive, which sparked good and productive discussion in the comments. Such a discussion not only helps the original poster but also those who had a similar question but were unsure of how to ask. Thus, the content perpetuates good discussion and invites cisgender members to make an effort to be trans-positive, even if it means showing that they still need to learn how to improve. Additionally, posts like these directly invite transgender women to join in a conversation, giving them a platform to use on their own terms and in a positive way. The opportunity allows for positive interactions between cisgender and

transgender members, which is important to improve trans-positivity (Walch 2012; Case and Stewart 2013).

### *Affirmation Posts*

The most controversial form of support is what I will refer to as affirmation posts on r/actuallesbians. Affirmation posts consist of a short and simple message along the lines of “trans women are women” or “trans women belong here” with no additional context. They will also appear more frequently if the Subreddit recently experienced an uptick in transphobic content. The posts are a staple of the r/actuallesbians community, as they pop up about every week or so and get a lot of upvotes every time. For the most part, participants appreciated affirmation posts as an important source of support from the Subreddit for transgender women. Even those with neutral or negative attitudes toward them typically admitted that they had been helpful for their self-esteem in the early days of transition or of identifying as a transgender WLW.

Four participants, however, took issue with them for different reasons. Some felt that these sorts of posts were shallow and performative. For example, a white lesbian who has been a member of the Subreddit for three years shared her complaint against affirmation posts, “I’ve commented on a few of those saying like, while that’s all nice and good being like trans women are women, like they’re valid or whatever, I feel like it’s sort of like performative... And I had a lot of people get mad at me for that. And it got to the point where they had to like, lock that post, that thread... I got like, suspended for a week from the mod team.” The scenario described is the most extreme case of members in r/actuallesbians getting defensive upon being called out. She feels that they are performative because such posts are easy to make and are beneficial to the person who posts them, because they are guaranteed to accrue plenty of upvotes, raising their karma. Meanwhile, unlearning transmisogyny is difficult and takes a lot of time and energy. The

reaction from this participant, along with the comments of others that the posts used to be reassuring but were now either neutral or negative signals that affirmation posts have been a staple of r/actuallesbians for quite a while—maybe for too long of a while. Perhaps part of the frustration lies in the history of r/actuallesbians. One Hispanic bisexual woman explains the exact turning point:

There was essentially a before and after with r/actuallesbians where there was a, I remember a big moment where there were I believe it was gender critical, r/gendercritical among other subreddits where they went kind of on a big crusade and serve a bunch of more subreddits were popping up and non trans subreddits essentially had to pick a side, Hey, do we support trans people and all these trans folks? Or are we, you know, totally cool with, you know, transphobic content? So r/actuallesbians was one that chose to be against transphobic content and people.

After being given an ultimatum to either defend transgender users or be lenient on transphobia, the Subreddit's community and moderating team have consistently called out overt transphobia, learned to recognize microaggressions, and educated ignorant members—all of which were massive steps away from the free-for-all of transmisogyny that once littered r/actuallesbians like other WLW Subreddits. Since then, r/actuallesbians has been held to a higher standard of trans-positivity. Now, the Subreddit has been at this stage for a while, in which each week or even every few days, an affirmation post is created and becomes popular, despite the cisnormativity that is clearly still present in the Subreddit. Affirmation posts, while positive in nature, signal a possible stagnation in the journey of trans-positivity that r/actuallesbians has been on for the past years.

One participant—a 25-year-old German bisexual, homoromantic woman—had a unique view on the matter, in that she did not want her transgender identity to be the focus of attention

on r/actuallesbians. When asked what she had heard from other transgender women she had talked to, the participant said she was not the only one with these feelings:

For r/actuallesbians, It's a bit mixed as in mostly good, but depending on who I'm talking to, it's like similar grievances that I have... It's just sometimes a little bit pushy, like, depending on your mood, how you interpret it. Like I said, it's very vocal about the trans positivity and sometimes as a trans woman, you don't really want to have it all about the transness. And that's like, that's like the most common complaint I had with people I talked with. ...like given the day, you know, like you feel good, but you don't really want to uh be confronted with your transness... And that is also something that is different between people, some people need it as often as they can get it. Some people don't need it at all.

One other participant had a similar sentiment toward the Subreddit's focus on transgender women. Though the participant acknowledges that her desire to not focus on transgender identity all the time is a personal preference, her thinking nevertheless complicates what a desirable trans-inclusive space looks like. Opinions about this issue may have a connection to how participants view their own transgender identity. In contrast, many of the other participants mentioned that they were proudly out or just generally enjoyed talking about transgender experiences with others. Meanwhile, this particular participant prefers to inhabit WLW spaces without the reminder of her transness. The other participant that shared this sentiment herself practices "stealth," meaning she is publicly known simply as a woman and relies on others online and offline to assume that she is cisgender, very rarely stating otherwise. There were not enough participants who felt this way to note any patterns, but a study focusing on this would be useful. Given that both women are members of r/actuallesbians, it is important to take their preferences into consideration when constructing a trans-inclusive space.

It seems that affirmation posts are appreciated by transgender women who need them or if they come in a moment of contention against transgender women. However, their prevalence in r/actuallesbians dulls the positive sentiment in them and makes them appear more shallow and

performative over time to some participants. Perhaps with how common it is to see other forms of support and affirmations in the Subreddit, the affirmation posts feel like a stagnation in the process of trans-positivity, as they offer no additional message to start or resume fruitful conversations the way advice or open discussions about transgender women do. Still, to say that affirmation posts are negative would be inaccurate, as they have an impact on individual transgender women who need simple messages of support.

### *The Community Against Transphobia*

A recurring and unexpected form of affirmation was the community and moderator responses to harassment. Transgender women feel safer and more comfortable participating in a space knowing that, even if they receive some harassment, the community will quickly respond to it through the karma system and comments, and moderators will quickly delete the transphobic content. Related to this, transgender women appreciated the r/actuallesbians community's didactic response to what seemed to be ignorant content about transgender women. Shutting down transphobia quickly and effectively seems to reassure transgender women interested in participating in the Subreddit. The positive environment reinforced through defending transgender women creates a feedback loop through which they are more likely to participate and interact with cisgender WLW, thus creating an even more trans-positive environment that normalizes the interactions.

When one participant was asked how she felt about the community response to transphobic content on r/actuallesbians, she explained:

In terms of how responses made me feel like most of the time, very good. Cause like the majority of people are very nice and try to be kind of like, "Hey, that's not okay." Or, "Hey, you're wrong about this one," and then try to explain in details, like what's going on. Which I, I feel it's really nice. It's very, it's very comforting...when someone kind of like jumps to your defense, it feels good.

The positive response from users seemingly overwhelmed the negativity of the transphobic content for this participant. Even though r/actuallesbians is often a target for lurking TERFs because of how open and popular it is, the community's quick response to defend transgender women makes such attacks less intimidating, especially because shortly after the transphobic comments are called out, they are deleted by moderators. Though the majority of WLW Subreddits have rules against transphobic content clearly stated, participants indicated that some communities do not enforce these to the same extent. The moderating team of the r/actuallesbians community has a reputation for being both extremely vigilant and strict on transphobic language on the Subreddit. Finding deleted comments at the bottom of comment sections was a common experience among participants, which speaks to how quickly moderators will delete the transphobic comments that they find. Even though r/actuallesbians is an easy target for TERFs to come in and spread transphobia, most of what they say is filtered thanks to the community bringing comments down to the bottom and hiding them with downvotes until the moderators come in and delete them. The result is a much more positive comment thread that is more comfortable to read.

Thus, moderators fulfill a role of not only setting rules for a community but enforcing them to such an extent that members also develop the instinct to push back against this type of content. This idea was highlighted by one participant:

It's obviously teamwork. I can't say there's any amount that falls to anyone. It is a matter of creating...communal knowledge... The point is that...by using specific language, and setting specific rules, and by enforcing them in specific ways...people will understand what you're saying. It's, you're kind of trying to teach everyone what being nice to everyone else means in terms of this kind of community, because you are of course, reaching just everyone on the internet that wants to show up. And if you make your community welcoming enough, then it will start being welcoming to itself.



The result is a community that can identify transphobic content and garner the initiative to fight against it, thus filtering it out of sight from subsequent viewers. While the moderators are vigilant, having a community that can regulate itself by calling out harmful material makes the job of moderators much easier (Squirrel 2019). And once an accepting attitude becomes part of the Subreddit's culture, the moderators' response to transphobia seems less extreme, as the general consensus becomes that these microaggressions are harmful and must be deleted.

#### RELYING ON R/ACTUALLESBIANS

Given the combination of harassment, cisnormativity, and affirmation on r/actuallesbians, it is important to note how many participants rely on the largest WLW Subreddit for support. Nine participants stated that they rely on r/actuallesbians for support, with four of them using it as their main source of support. Others had other communities to turn to but still placed r/actuallesbians high on their list of sources for reassurance and validation. The size of the community was a main reason for its popularity as a support system. The high level of engagement from users and its openness toward individuals with various gender identities and sexual/romantic orientations made it easy to find someone who has asked for the same advice and to read the feedback they received. A couple of participants mentioned that just reading the content that is already posted, especially the affirmative comments about transgender women, make it a quick source for support even without actively seeking it out through making posts and waiting for comments.

For some women, online communities of support were simply not a sufficient replacement for offline support. Six participants relied on r/actuallesbians either a minimal amount or not at all. Of the three who relied on it to a small degree, two stated that they used to

rely on it more before establishing a support system of their own and would very likely go back to it first if they ever needed support outside of the system they already have. One participant did not elaborate why she did not rely on it for support, but she had overall mixed feelings about the Subreddit, mainly because of the cisnormativity and the focus on transgender women, so it may simply not be a community that she is interested in relying on. Of the three that did not rely on the Subreddit at all, two of them had overall negative views of r/actuallesbians, and one had mixed opinions of it and was also put off by its focus on transgender women. Two of them also had a support system to rely on outside of the Subreddit.

A third of participants, most of which did not rely on r/actuallesbians for support, believed that it was better to find support among a smaller community in a private space, especially if that space was in person. They preferred to seek advice and support from a group of people that they could trust rather than airing their problems out into a public space.

Overall, a healthy majority of participants relied on r/actuallesbians for support in some way, which shows the importance of it in their lives. Several participants also stated that they lived in an area that had conservative opinions about sex and gender, and all of them relied on the Subreddit. And certainly, the visibly active population of transgender women on the Subreddit suggests even more transgender women beyond the sample are comfortable in the community. Because of how important the Subreddit is in some women's lives, it is necessary to maintain the positive parts of the community and reexamine the negative parts of it.

What makes r/actuallesbians a favorable or unfavorable source of support to rely on also depends largely on how transgender women evaluate online spaces versus offline ones. Many participants pointed out that online spaces seemed a little safer, especially in terms of starting conversation. The anonymity and vast global reach of online platforms like Reddit make it easier

to start conversations with new people than it otherwise would be offline (Ingram et al. 2017; Haimson et al. 2021). Online, it is easier to find someone to talk to, instantly check what they have said in the past on the platform, and block the person if the conversation becomes uncomfortable or dangerous. Additionally, there is no worry about how appearances may affect an interaction. As one 31 year old lesbian participant stated:

I feel like it provides better support online because at a certain point, if you're trans you can disappear just among the sea of other women. I don't know if that makes sense. Like it's like, you don't have to say your trans, like, and if you're a trans person who doesn't quote-unquote “pass,” your dysphoria is lessened, and you can pretend that you pass a lot better than you actually do, if that makes any sense.

The sheer anonymity of a site like Reddit makes it easy to escape judgment based on looks. And as the participant mentioned, it is much easier to blend in among other WLW. Unfortunately, only a couple of participants mentioned having experience with local offline queer spaces, but neither of them had noteworthy experiences that affected how they evaluated online versus offline spaces. It may be worth looking into how acceptance of transgender women in WLW or otherwise queer spaces changes online versus offline, given this participant's reference to physical appearance not having as much of an effect on acceptance in online spaces.

But of course, some participants were still uncomfortable with the idea of seeking support from a group of strangers in a public setting, even if it is online. Despite the ability to block people who make the conversation uncomfortable, some participants prefer to simply avoid bad interactions altogether by turning to local support systems, especially close friends.

Another important point was the accessibility of online spaces. Not having to dress up and interact with a new group of people the way offline groups are set up to be made the online community more appealing. And discussing experiences related to being a transgender WLW online rarely has real life consequences, since accounts can be easily deleted if the online

experience becomes too heated (Triggs 2021). Overall, the safety of online spaces was higher than that of offline spaces. However, participants had a mix of opinions about whether one was better than the other. Online spaces are still a good resource to have available in case offline spaces are inaccessible, but for some people, they simply do not compare to offline support.

#### WHAT MAKES A GOOD COMMUNITY

First and foremost, an online community needs to be welcoming and supportive for it to matter to participants. However, part of r/actuallesbians success is not just the trans-positivity but the other attractive factors that make any Subreddit—even non-queer ones—popular among Reddit users.

The most prominent of these were the casual and positive atmosphere of the Subreddit. Even though r/actuallesbians has all sorts of posts, varying from joyful to upset, the community does not take itself too seriously. A couple of participants compared the atmosphere to that of a coffee shop: very casual and mellow, with all kinds of conversations happening. This is due in part to the quick response from community members and moderators against hateful content, not just the transphobic kind. Monitoring posts and comments through the karma system and deletion keeps discussions positive and fruitful. Additionally, r/actuallesbians has a community rule asking members to keep their posts on topic, but comments are free to derail as much as users would like, which keeps conversations spontaneous and limitless in terms of how users bond. On the other side of this, however, some participants felt that other Subreddits, particularly transgender Subreddits, did not take themselves seriously enough and were not adequate spaces for seeking advice.

The casual “coffee shop” atmosphere in r/actuallesbians was perhaps the most popular of pull factors, as opposed to a gloomy or overly aggressive atmosphere being a push factor. For instance, the r/lesbiangamers Subreddit was reported to sometimes exhibit aggressive behavior due to the competitive nature of it, which sometimes makes the community a little daunting to participate in. Surprisingly, this push factor was also common among some transgender Subreddits to the point that two participants actually felt more comfortable in r/actuallesbians than in those communities, even though they exhibit far less cisnormativity and transphobic harassment. The transgender Subreddits were reportedly great for venting, seeking advice, and making deprecating jokes, according to participants, but the constant negativity of the content made them grating for their mental health. One participant shared, “I used to be [on] a lot of trans subreddits, but I kind of left them all just because a lot of them were really depressing, like, ‘dysphoria is terrible, and life sucks.’ Yeah. Dysphoria is terrible. I don't want to have to read about that all day long, you know?” Such a sentiment was expressed by other participants as well. It appears to be more of a preference, given how big most transgender Subreddits are, but it seemed to be a significant push factor for them. Because of this, they preferred to read and share positive content in r/actuallesbians. However, they did not abandon their use of transgender communities entirely but simply cut back on them. For the most part, participants appear to enjoy a more lighthearted online experience when seeking support.

Other welcoming factors were mostly related to the Subreddit’s size, such as the diversity of the population and the level of engagement. With such a vast array of users visiting or becoming members of r/actuallesbians, there is a high probability of finding someone with which to have an enjoyable conversation with in the comments or from whom to derive unique perspectives on various topics. The diversity may also be a reason why the Subreddit was not

seen as an echo chamber for most participants, unlike other WLW Subreddits and some of the transgender Subreddits. The level of engagement is higher than smaller WLW Subreddits that leave posts without any comments and simply do not have enough fresh content to keep members checking in routinely. Other Subreddits may be too specific and simply have content that is not interesting to enough users. That being said, its size brought disadvantages as well. For instance, the openness and popularity of the community make it an easy target for brigades and random users to make harassing content.

To conclude, transgender women are received somewhat positively in WLW spaces when focusing on r/actuallesbians. However, reception of transgender women varies widely across different communities of queer women. While some other WLW Subreddits also welcome transgender women, r/actuallesbians excels in regulating the community both through the effort of moderators and community members, from the perspective of participants. The community provides something of a safe haven from the rampant transphobia in mainstream Subreddits. However, because it is a public online community that has garnered a lot of popularity, it is often targeted by TERFs who plan brigades and regularly debase trans-focused discussions by downvoting content from transgender users and leaving hateful comments. The fact that transphobic content is believed to come from TERFs outside the Subreddit trying to dismantle trans-positivity contrasts the history of trans-exclusionary feminists framing transgender women as outsiders who are trying to infiltrate women's spaces (Withers 2010; Richardson 2013). The difference in framing demonstrates that the boundary maintenance practiced by r/actuallesbians favors including transgender women and filtering out transphobia.

Transgender women themselves also do a lot of boundary maintenance by carefully sorting their content on Reddit, making sure not to stray into Subreddits that are rumored to be transphobic and also having to deal with private harassment. But it appears that creating such a carefully curated experience on Reddit takes time, and likely a lot of exposure to transphobic content. This can intimidate transgender women from participating in Subreddits at all, which is why it is important to prevent the public form of harassment as much as possible.

r/actuallesbians and the rest of Reddit (apart from transgender Subreddits) have a glaring problem with cisnormativity. In fact, it is so prevalent that many participants were desensitized and had an “it’s just the way it is” attitude about it. The support that is present in r/actuallesbians is mostly found through the effort that community members make to be accommodating as well as the overall response to transphobic content that pops up in the community. Transgender members feel reassured and validated because of the widespread action against transphobia. Still, the affirmation posts of the community signal a possible stagnation in the process of becoming more trans-positive.

The majority of participants rely on r/actuallesbians a decent amount, and half of those that do not expressed previous on it before establishing their own support systems. The experiences of participants with r/actuallesbians indicates that online spaces can be an important resource for support, especially for those who live in an area with conservative views on gender and sex. Because of its importance, it is crucial to make these spaces not only welcoming but an attractive and positive space for users.

## Conclusion

This study set out to answer the question: How are transgender women received in online spaces made by and for women-loving-women?

As detailed in the literature review, transgender women are not the first group within the WLW community to be discriminated against. Because the lesbian identity was tethered so tightly to a cisgender AFAB body and a sexual attraction exclusive to such a body, offline spaces tended to discriminate against non-lesbian queer women and transgender women. The liberation of women was reserved solely for the white, middle-class, cisgender lesbian, from which the promoted idea of the lesbian consciousness was born. And this exclusive idea is perpetuated to this day, especially through the hyperfixation of pitting transgender issues against women's issues, even though both groups and their overlap are in a committed struggle against the patriarchy.

There do exist queer and WLW spaces that are trans-inclusive to varying degrees, and the concepts of "lesbian" and "woman" are being expanded to include more diverse experiences from those who identify with either or both statuses. However, many queer spaces that are trans-inclusive still tie themselves to gender roles in some way, upholding a standard of femininity, which not only affects transgender women but polices the appearance and behaviors of all members. Such a pattern was observed in r/actuallesbians.

My findings indicate that transgender WLW are received differently depending on the space they are in, considering how large and diverse Reddit can be with its communities. Focusing on r/actuallesbians, the general response seems to be that transgender WLW are received quite positively in the community. Even though harassment from outsiders is common



in the community, members still feel safe because of the quick community call-outs against transphobia and the vigilant moderators' response to delete transphobic content as soon as they can. The result is a community that keeps discussion about transgender WLW mostly positive, making them feel that their input is valued by the rest of the community.

However, r/actuallesbians—and all of Reddit—has an issue with cisnormativity. Despite the mostly positive evaluation of r/actuallesbians, most participants agreed that cisnormativity was present in the community, mainly in the form of jokes about WLW sexuality and the concept of socialization as girls.

Most participants rely on r/actuallesbians for support, making the Subreddit an important source of affirmation for transgender women. Participants felt safer seeking support in a space that offered anonymity and an easy way to disengage in conversations if necessary.

What makes r/actuallesbians a successful Subreddit is its positivity, which is accomplished through the moderating team's quick response to transphobia in combination with the community's dedication to calling out and downvoting transphobic content until it is no longer visible. The active fight against transphobia on the Subreddit is a constant one, but with its size, the role of community members standing up for transgender women is crucial.

Though there is a considerable gap in the available literature on the topic of this study, the findings still corroborate existing knowledge. The existence of various exclusionary and transphobic WLW Subreddits demonstrates a continuing trend of trans-exclusion among the WLW community as a whole. Trans-exclusionary practices are common enough that building a properly inclusive Subreddit requires intense vigilance from both moderators and community members. This is the same culture that grew from the separatist mindset of the lesbian community and manifested itself as womyn-born-womyn policies in offline WLW spaces over

the years. Additionally, the prevalence of cisnormativity in even the most trans-inclusive WLW Subreddits depicts the continued belief that the identity of a queer woman is tied to her body, which must be AFAB in order for her gender and sexuality to be validated. Cisnormativity and trans-exclusion both place the bodies of queer women as central to the queer woman experience, disregarding the actual culture that is built between transgender and cisgender WLW. Both cisnormativity and trans-exclusion assume a shared experience that divides cisgender women from transgender women. And even though a cisnormative online WLW space can still be trans-inclusive enough for transgender women to participate, the humor and other cisnormative content in r/actuallesbians fail to acknowledge the diversity of the community. Thus, cisnormativity, though not as strong of a discrimination tactic, has a clear tie to trans-exclusionary practices by centering the AFAB body in discussions. Even though r/actuallesbians has turned itself into a safe space for transgender women, there is still a need for more trans-inclusive humor and content in order for transgender women to be equal contributors to the culture of r/actuallesbians and other online WLW spaces rather than just a population being catered to.

Furthermore, participants' practices on Reddit parallel the literature on online boundary maintenance and the importance of online spaces for connection and education. Many participants described the limitations they set for their usage of Reddit to avoid harassment: silently observing transphobic content, steering clear of specific communities, and even marking transphobic spaces to avoid transphobic content altogether. These practices demonstrate the way content curation of is used to create a collection of safe spaces for transgender women. Curating content is a safe way for transgender women to navigate online spaces, and they rely on known trans-inclusive spaces as reliable places to avoid transphobic content. Additionally, a fair amount

of participants relied on r/actuallesbians for support or used to rely on it before acquiring their own support systems, which indicates the importance of online spaces for LGBT+ individuals. The size and accessibility of r/actuallesbians were two popular pull factors for participants. Inclusive online spaces provide access to education and important connections with others, as past studies have explained. However, the intersectionality between different LGBT+ identities (for instance transgender and WLW) must be further investigated. Some of the women in this study deeply valued r/actuallesbians as a space in which they could connect with other cisgender and transgender WLW as transgender WLW themselves. It is the rarity of finding a space that allows such connections that makes r/actuallesbians so valuable. While it is known that LGBT+ individuals rely on social media for community more than non-LGBT+ individuals, transgender WLW may have a more difficult time finding an adequate online community because of the stigma surrounding the intersectionality of the transgender and WLW identities.

This study intended to bridge the gap in the knowledge on how transgender women are received in WLW spaces and the importance and function of online queer spaces. It contributes to the sociology of gender and sexuality as well as the sociological perspective of online spaces. As for next steps, further research is needed to continue evaluating how transgender women are received in online WLW spaces. R/actuallesbians is considered a trans-positive community, so looking into other Subreddits or other WLW communities on other social media platforms would shed more light on which spaces treat and value transgender women the best and what they do to maintain a positive community. Additional research is also needed to determine ways to combat cisnormativity in online spaces, given what a prevalent issue it was. There should also be a discussion about finding the balance between making trans-positive WLW online spaces accessible while protecting them from outside harassment. Future studies could also focus on the

patterns of brigades on Reddit and how they relate to banning Subreddits that are considered hateful. Such research could provide insight on the effects of such brigades on communities and how to protect those targeted communities from these attacks.

Finally, this study is limited by the races and ethnicities of participants. The majority of participants were Non-Hispanic White, and race and ethnicity were missing from the discussion of experiences on r/actuallesbians and Reddit as a whole. Because of this, there is a whole layer of intersectional experiences that went untouched in this study. There is research on the struggle of queer people of color finding community. Future research could expand on this study by focusing on transgender WLW of color to delve deeper into their unique experiences in online spaces for WLW.

My hope is that this study serves as an introduction to the rich world of online queer spaces and the way that they continue the dynamics between transgender and cisgender WLW, provoking more research into the topic.

## APPENDIX

### GLOSSARY

**AFAB:** Abbreviation for “assigned female at birth,” describing an individual whose sex was declared female at the time of their birth.

**Brigade:** Also known as a raid. An organized attack from a community, in which users overwhelm the Subreddit they are targeting with spam and upsetting content to harass members of that Subreddit.

**Cisgender:** An individual who identifies with their assigned gender at birth.

**Cisnormativity:** The assumption that everyone is cisgender until proven otherwise

**Flair System:** a function on Reddit that gives users an extra title or identifier next to their username when they post in a community. In the context of r/actuallesbians, the flair system identifies the user’s sexual identity (bisexual, pansexual, lesbian, etc) and gender identity (non-binary, transgender woman, etc).

**Karma:** Reddit’s point system, often used as a measurement of how popular a user’s posts and comments are on the platform. Karma increases with upvotes from other users and decreases with downvotes.

**Lesbian:** For the purposes of this study, this term has two definitions. In the context of a “lesbian community,” the term describes groups of queer women, often identifying themselves as part of a liberation movement. Though lesbians were not the only women in these communities, I refer to these communities as “lesbian communities” in the literature review, because that is how the sources identified them.

In the context of individuals, a lesbian is a woman who is exclusively attracted to women. According to Tate and Pearson, the lesbian identity can and should be expanded to include non-binary individuals, transgender men, and women who are not exclusively attracted to other women, and I agree with this sentiment. However, because this study focuses on women-loving-women only, this expanded definition of “lesbian will not be used,” especially since tensions between lesbian bisexual women will be discussed, and it will be less confusing to make this distinction.

**Moderator:** An individual that creates and often enforces rules for a Subreddit. They have the power to make the community private, receive reports, and ban Reddit users from the community.

**Reddit:** a social media platform made up of many communities resembling internet forums. Reddit users can post images, videos, or text in a community, and members of that community vote up, vote down, and/or leave comments on the post. Content moderation on the platform itself is less strict than other popular social media platforms. However, Subreddit moderators can be as strict or as lenient with content moderation in their own communities as they desire.

**Subreddit:** An online community on the social media platform Reddit.

**TERF:** An abbreviation for “trans-exclusionary radical feminist.” These are individuals who self-identify as feminists but discriminate against transgender women, due to a belief that transgender women are a threat to cisgender women.

**Transgender:** An individual who does not identify with their assigned gender at birth.

**Transmisogyny:** Coined by Julia Serano. Hatred or discrimination aimed at transgender women.

**Trans-exclusion:** A form of discrimination that excludes transgender people from a community they would otherwise be welcomed in if they were cisgender.

**Troll:** A social media user who purposely posts controversial content or behaves in a controversial manner to purposely upset other users. In the context of Reddit, trolls can be identified through their extremely low karma, often in the negatives.

**WLW:** an abbreviation for “women-loving-women.” This term is for all women who are attracted to women romantically and/or sexually, including women who are pansexual, bisexual, asexual, etc. It should be noted that I describe r/actuallesbians as a WLW Subreddit; however, I acknowledge that the community is also home to non-binary people and transgender men.

## INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Hello. Could you please tell me your preferred name?

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. This interview will take 1-2 hours.

To provide a bit of information on this project: I am looking to interview up to thirty transgender women who have been members of the Subreddit “r/actuallesbians” for at least six months. This research will explore how transgender women are received in online spaces made by and for women-loving-women.

This interview will focus on your experiences within r/actuallesbians and other online experiences regarding your identity. Do you have any questions for me?

Please remember that you are free to skip any questions that you are not comfortable answering. Are you ready to begin?

1. How old are you?
2. What race and ethnicity do you identify as?
3. What is your highest level of education?
4. How do you identify your sexual/romantic orientation? If not exclusively attracted to women, do you feel that your orientation is accepted in r/actuallesbians?
5. How long have you been a member of r/actuallesbians? Are you still a member?
6. How much do you participate in r/actuallesbians? Do you mainly read posts and comments? Do you make posts and comments yourself? How often do you check the Subreddit?
7. To what degree do you feel welcomed within the r/actuallesbians Subreddit? Why do you feel that way?
8. Have you noticed any change in acceptance toward transgender women in the time you have been a member?
9. Do you feel that your input in the community is valued as much as the input of any cisgender member of r/actuallesbians? Why or why not?
10. Are you a member of other Subreddits for women-loving-women, transgender women, and/or transgender individuals in general? If so, how comfortable do you feel engaging in any of them, compared to r/actuallesbians?
11. Are there any women-loving-women Subreddits that you did not want to join? If so, what made you not want to join?
12. Have you experienced or witnessed any interactions that you consider to be transphobic within r/actuallesbians? If so, what happened? What was the response from other users or the moderator team? How did that response make you feel?



13. Have you ever experienced or witnessed any insensitive comments about transgender women in r/actuallesbians? If so, do you believe these comments were written with bad intentions? What was the community reaction to these comments and how did the response make you feel?
14. Have you experienced or witnessed any affirming interactions that made you feel especially welcome as a transgender woman in r/actuallesbians? What happened? What was the response from other users, and how did that response make you feel?
15. Cisnormativity, as defined for this study, is the assumption that everyone is cisgender until proven otherwise. Do you feel that there is cisnormativity present within r/actuallesbians? If so, does this cisnormativity affect how willing you are to engage in the community and/or how welcome you feel? Do you notice any cisnormativity in other Subreddits made for women-loving-women?
16. Have you ever talked to other transgender women in r/actuallesbians about their experiences in the Subreddit or Reddit in general? What have you heard of their experiences?
17. Have you ever been a part of or witnessed a movement by transgender women in this Subreddit in defense of their presence in the community?
18. Have you ever experienced or witnessed transphobia from users outside of r/actuallesbians Reddit? This can include another Subreddit or your personal DMs. How did you react?
19. Do you often talk about your identity and experiences offline to individuals who identify as LGBT+? If so, how comfortable do you feel discussing these topics offline versus online?
20. Do you feel that LGBT+ online communities are in any way safer or easier to join and engage in compared to offline ones? Why or why not?
21. How much do you rely on r/actuallesbians as a space for finding support from both cisgender and transgender women-loving-women? Do you feel that it provides better support than other online and/or offline spaces?

Those are all the questions I have for you. Thank you again for participating. I really appreciate that you took time out of your day to answer these questions.

Tomorrow, I will send you a message to thank you again and give you another chance to ask any additional questions. Your compensation of \$20 should arrive within a week.

Have a great day.

TABLE OF PARTICIPANTS

Participant	Age	Race-Ethnicity	Country	Education	Orientation	Membership
1	26	Bengali	US	Bachelor's	Lesbian	10 years
2	22	NH White	US	HS	Demisexual Lesbian	2 years
3	31	Hispanic	US	Bachelor's	Lesbian	5 years
4	25	NH White	Germany	HS	Bisexual Homoromantic	1 year
5	30	NH White	US	PhD	Asexual Lesbian	4 years
6	21	NH White	US	HS	Lesbian	3 years
7	19	NH White	US	HS	Lesbian	1 year
8	25	NH White	US	HS	Queer	1 year
9	34	NH White	UK	HS	Lesbian	1 year
10	33	NH White	UK	Bachelor's	Bisexual Homoromantic	3 years
11	28	Hispanic	US	Associate's	Bisexual Homoromantic	2 years
12	29	NH White	Denmark	HS	Lesbian	1 year
13	22	NH White	US	HS	Lesbian	4 years
14	21	NH White	US	HS	Lesbian	6 months
15	32	NH White (Mediterranean)	US	HS	Lesbian	4 years

NH White: Non-Hispanic White

US: United States

UK: United Kingdom

HS: High School

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